

A townful of mobsters — a sin-crazy woman —
COULD ONE MAN TAKE THEM BOTH?



25c

Don't DIG Deeper

WILLIAM FRANCIS



A LION ORIGINAL—
NOT A REPRINT

“LAY OFF — OR ELSE!”

To make it prettier, they offered me fifteen grand if I'd forget about the whole thing.

To make it uglier, they added, “If you stay, you're just digging your own grave!”

But I couldn't get out and leave Squint behind. If I didn't find Squint in a hurry, they'd have him in the morgue before morning. And Ricco—no matter what, I was going to get Ricco. And I couldn't forget Alp, the little guy with his fingernails pulled out, his feet burned, his back ripped to shreds, and I couldn't forget Stella and the grotesque, bloodied heap of her body.

The only trouble was that they had a perfect frame rigged, and if I decided to stay, they could spring it in a minute and it would fit . . . a good enough fit to send me to the gas chamber . . .



Don't Dig Deeper is a completely new novel. It has never been published before, in any form, at any price. For the very best in *new* novels, always look for the words—

A LION ORIGINAL—NOT A REPRINT

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William Francis

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Don't Dig Deeper

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A LION BOOK



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CHAPTER I

A FAT, UNHAPPY ITALIAN GUY had hired me to get enough evidence on his wife so he could shed her without losing his shirt. She was his second wife, strictly the result of loneliness, prosperity and a change of life. She was a tough little bottle blonde, intriguingly equipped, from the chorus line of a cheap night club. And she was easy to tag. She didn't figure the fat guy would ever get tired of her rationed goodies, so she'd never broken her alliance with her handsome but indigent boy friend. So I was near them in a place called Ricco's, a thinly disguised gambling joint in a small, rotten, but exclusive beach town called Coastview—a matter of thirty miles from the center of Los Angeles but out of its city limits. I was waiting for them to get tired of losing money and turn to matters biological. The fat guy, who was supposed to be in San Francisco on business, and a photographer were staked out in a bar near the boy friend's apartment, and as soon as I'd pegged my pigeons safely into that nest I was to pick them up and spring the surprise. Pictures—and I was sure they'd be the right kind—and the eye witness account of the three of us would be enough to tie a can on the blonde with a minimum pay-out. And, with a few interruptions, it worked out just that way.

The first interruption was a raid on Ricco's.

In Coastview, a police raid on a joint like Ricco's was a forceful reminder that the operator was behind in his dues, and the procedure was always the same. There was a signal, two quick buzzes from the doorman, then a very orderly entrance by the cops. None of the equip-

ment was touched, none of the money confiscated—but the suckers were herded past a table where their names and addresses, certified by some identification, were taken. Bail, which was ten bucks a head, could be paid then or mailed in later. The list of suckers always appeared in one of the Los Angeles papers along with an account of the raid. But it wasn't always the full list. The way to get off that list was to pay another ten bucks to the Lieutenant in charge of the raid—the same Lieutenant who sold the list to the L.A. reporter. This Lieutenant was a very sensitive person with a delicate feeling about graft. He wouldn't put the arm on anyone; if you knew enough to slip him the ten quietly, your name got off the list. If you didn't, it stayed on; the Lieutenant didn't solicit. The operator was arrested and fined and, because the raids were bad for business, it was a nice lesson. They didn't happen very often.

I knew enough about Ricco's to know there was a sliding panel in his office that led into a dark lane between his building and the next, and I knew enough about Coastview to know how the raid would go—but I didn't know enough about what the blonde knew to take a chance. If she knew enough to slip the Lieutenant the ten, it was all right; if she didn't, the fact that her name would be taken and linked with her boy friend's in the morning paper would probably worry her enough to call off any by-play she'd planned for that night, and that would upset my arrangements. Between the first and second warning buzz, I made up my mind to take the two of them out through Ricco's office. And when the second buzz sounded I was between them. I took their arms and pushed them toward the curtained entrance of the hall that led to Ricco's office. It figured to be empty because he was on the floor to greet the cops. It was probably their first experience with a Coastview raid because they didn't hold back or object. I got them down the hall and into the office and had the panel open,

and we were out in the darkness before either of them said anything.

"What's the idea?" the blonde asked.

"Police raid," I said. "Let's get to your car before they miss us."

I left the panel open and led my pair down the area-way and into the back street. They'd parked on that road, and I was only one car behind them. I got them in the car and closed the door and leaned in.

"Drive away slowly," I said. "You won't attract any attention."

The blonde said, "Thanks," and started the car, and I watched it pull away from the curb.

Then I turned around and saw the little guy standing there.

There wasn't much light, but there was enough. The little man was wearing a pair of shorts and he was crying. He dripped blood from his hands, and his feet had left bloody footprints that led to the areaway. He swayed in front of me, the soft sound of his sobs the only noise in the street. Then he fell. I caught him before he hit the sidewalk, and my hands on his back felt the soft mess of mangled flesh. I eased him down. He was breathing, but his eyes were closed.

"Grange," he managed. "Tell Grange."

"Where?"

"Wilmar." He groaned.

"Who did it?" I asked.

I could feel the effort he was making. He tried, but he didn't get it out, and I couldn't read anything from his lips. And then he was dead. I left him there in his blood on the dark, cold sidewalk. He didn't care.

The blonde's car was parked in front of her boy friend's apartment. I went to the bar and had a drink with the fat guy and the photographer, and then the three of us went up and broke in on the party.

The pictures were just what we needed.

The next morning, Thursday, it was raining when I

got up. I made and drank a pot of coffee and then looked for a Grange in the phone book. None of them had a Wilmar address—the closest was a D. S. Grange on Wilmot. My city map didn't list a Wilmar Street, but there was a Hotel Wilmar on Hope Street. I got my rain coat and drove over there. The clerk at the desk told me that Howard Grange was registered. The room was 520. I took the elevator up and walked down the hall to the door.

He was a tall, white-haired man, probably in his sixties. His face was long and thin, and his nose was prominent and beak-shaped. His eyes were pale blue. His mouth was large and his lips were thin. He wore a closely, thinly trimmed mustache, white like his hair. He was wearing a light tan garbardine suit, white shirt, loud figured red and blue tie, and brown, rough-grained shoes. He looked fit and healthy. His voice was deep, and the accent was Middle West.

I gave him my card, and he invited me in, offered me a cigar and a cup of coffee. I accepted the coffee.

"You're a private detective, Mr. Cash?"

"That's right—small, one-man agency."

"And your business with me?"

"Maybe I haven't any," I said. "Do you know a small man, about five one or two, maybe a hundred and fifty pounds, with brown hair thinning on top? He might wear glasses. I'd say he was about forty, give or take a few years."

"Why do you ask?"

"If you don't," I said, "I haven't any business with you."

"I know such a man."

"Well," I said, "I was at a gambling joint in Coastview, Ricco's, last night. There was a raid, and I took a young couple out through a panel in Ricco's office. I got them to their car and watched them drive away, and when I turned around this little friend of yours was standing there. I'd left the panel open, and I figured he'd found that exit and took it."

"How does this concern me, Mr. Cash?"

"I'm coming to it," I said. "This little man was crying. He had a lot of reason to. He must have hurt because somebody had pulled all of his fingernails out, peeled a lot of skin off his back, and either burned or cut his feet. He couldn't do much talking, but he did manage to say, 'Tell Grange.' And when I asked him where Grange was, he said 'Wilmar.' "

I was watching Grange to see how he was taking it. His eyes had shown interest when I'd mentioned Coastview, and they'd narrowed a bit when I described the little man's condition. And that was all.

"And?" he asked.

"He died," I said. "After those three words."

"The papers," he said.

"I didn't bother to look," I said, "because he was too close to Ricco's. Even a body in good shape wouldn't be found that close to Ricco's, or even in Coastview if it could be helped. It'll turn up in county territory—Coastview taxpayers don't like bodies found in their town."

"What did you do about it, Mr. Cash?"

"I got away from there before anyone could find out that I'd seen and talked to the little man. That way I'll live longer."

"And you intend to do nothing?"

"Nothing. Do you know anything about Coastview?" I asked.

"Some."

"Then you know there's nothing I can do. That little man didn't have the strength to close that panel, so sooner or later either the cops or some of Ricco's boys found it open and looked around. The little man left bloody footprints, so he'd be easy to find. Should I go tell the Coastview cops that they found a body? I figure they know it."

"It's murder, Mr. Cash."

"Sure. But I make a living around here. Every once in a while I have to go into Coastview to do it."

"I see. Well, I was going to offer you a job, Mr. Cash."

"Was the little man working for you?" I asked.

"Yes. I had him investigating . . ."

"I don't want to know about it, Mr. Grange," I stopped him. "I don't like what happened to him, and I don't want it to happen to me. I don't like Coastview, or the setup, or the cops, or the gamblers and racketeers there—but I'm not the guy to mess with it. The people who live there think they've got a nice little town and their taxes are low, and the police give them a lot of protection, and they're happy with it all. They aren't beefing, and so I'm not."

I got up and walked to the door.

"I don't know how much they made the little man talk, Mr. Grange," I said, "but he might have spilt your name to them."

"I'm not easily frightened, Mr. Cash."

"I am," I told him.

CHAPTER II

I DUCKED THROUGH THE RAIN to my car and drove up West Fifth Street to the Cox Building and parked in the lot. My office, a two-room hole in the wall was on the third floor. The Cox Building is an old, tired building, badly maintained and needing paint and attention—my office is the same. The elevator, self-operated, reluctantly labored up to my floor. I unlocked the door and went in. The mail, three envelopes, lay on the floor just inside and I picked it up and went on into the inner room—the one with the window. The dark skies sent little light down the well to my window, and the room was dim and unfriendly. I switched on the light and sat down at my

desk, it and three chairs were the only furnishings. The mail was, as usual, unimportant. I got to work making a bill for labor and expenses for the fat client. It was ten o'clock, and I was working on the bill when the two big guys came in.

I knew one of them by sight—a sometime lighthheavy who stooged for Ricco, a mussed-up face, close-cropped hair, and a bent nose. He was wide across the shoulders and long in the arms, and he was a pigeon for a right cross. His name was Gus Ventizes. The other one looked like Gus might have before he'd stopped so many fists—same general build, same haircut, but the face was unmarked, and the nose was still square in the center. I didn't know this one or his name. Gus did the talking.

"Ricco wants to see you, Steve."

"Sure," I said. "I'll drop down."

"Now."

"All right," I agreed. I got my coat and we went out into the hall. "You going to bring me back or shall I take my car?" I asked.

That called for a conference between the two, and I waited while they whispered it over. Finally Gus said, "Take your heap and we'll follow you."

We didn't speak again. They followed me to, and into the elevator, and out through the rain to my car. I got in and started the motor and they watched me back out from the space and then turned to their own car. I drove slowly until I saw them behind me in the rear view mirror and then I drove normally. It was eleven when I stopped in front of Ricco's. I waited in the car until Gus parked behind me and then I got out and walked to the front entrance of the joint. The two guys joined me—Gus pushed the door open and I went in first.

"Into the office," Gus steered me.

I went through the dining-room and into the bigger game-room. The tables were covered and the room was empty. I pushed the curtains aside and went down the hall to Ricco's office. I could hear Gus breathing behind

me. "Right in," he said. I turned the knob and opened the door and went in.

Ricco was behind the big blond wood desk. He was about five eight, a hundred and sixty pounds, very neat, very sharply dressed. His skin was olive, and his black hair was slick and shiny. He had large, soft, brown eyes and his face was full. He didn't look dangerous.

This Ricco, in the Coastview setup, was not a very big shot. His joint was the smallest and least pretentious of four that operated there. His business was only in the joint, and the bookie business he ran there along with the rest of the gambling. The three bigger places in Coastview were owned by bigger men and their interests were wider. Pete Brant ran the Black Cat and controlled the slot machines in Coastview. Tony Moss owned the Surf Club and the wire service to the bookie joints. And Big Mike Moran ran the flashiest and biggest place, the Palace, and controlled policy, jukes, and anything else not under the other two. Above these four there was the Police Chief, Frank Best, who was appointed by the three-man city council, and who collected the protection cut. How much Frank kept was anybody's guess. The Mayor of Coastview was selected from the three-man council, which was selected by the residents. Tom Elwell, who published the *Coastview News*, nominated the councilmen. He kept a respectable front and tried to give the impression that his only power was in his paper.

Ricco smiled with his mouth and told me to sit down. I did.

"You were here last night, Steve," he told me.

"Yeah."

"Bunk don't remember taking your name."

"I went out the back way, Ricco," I said. "If it's the ten bucks . . ."

"Naw. What back way, Steve?"

"This," I said. "Through this office."

"You knew about the panel?"

"No," I lied. "I was just killing time until I had to

meet a husband and photographer for a break-in and I didn't have enough margin to go through the raid, so I came back here to see if you'd take me out past Bunk and his cops in a hurry. There was that panel open and you weren't here, so I just drifted."

"Yeah? You was alone?"

"Alone," I said.

"Didn't meet anybody? Wasn't anybody in here?"

"No," I said. "I didn't see anyone either in here or outside. I went right down the alleyway to my car and drove off. I saw a car driving away when I got to the street, but I didn't think anything of it."

"I don't like you to lie to me, Steve."

"Why would I lie, Ricco?" I asked.

"I figure to find out, Steve. You were the only one I'm sure of who didn't go through Bunk's line last night, so you knew about the panel and you opened it and went out, and maybe you wasn't alone. So I want to know how you knew and who you took out with you."

"I didn't know about it, Ricco . . ."

"Gus," he said.

Gus walked over to my chair and slapped me across the face. It was a hard slap that snapped my head and brought stars and rings dancing and shining in my eyes. Gus waited until I straightened my neck and then slashed me across the other way. He was casual about it—disinterested. Both blows were with the open hand.

My first reaction was to get up swinging, but I controlled it. I sat and tried to get my eyes focused on Ricco, tried to stop the shiny, bobbing stars and rings. I sat and tried to focus my eyes, and I tried to control my desire to fight, and I tried to be logical. I was in for a beating and I knew it. It was going to be bad, but not too bad—it was going to be calculated and coldly done—just enough to make lying unattractive to me, but not enough to make me a problem in disposal. If I could take it without fighting it, I'd come through; if I fought, someone would lose his head and go too far, and I wouldn't come

through. Just that simple. What would save me was that Ricco couldn't be too sure that I was lying. Someone else could have opened the panel, and I could have gone out alone. My reputation wasn't for toughness, and Ricco would figure a good, but not too bad, beating would crack me—if it didn't then I'd been telling the truth.

"Take him across the hall," Ricco said. "I don't want him bleeding on the rug."

Gus pulled me up by the coat collar and pushed me toward the door. The other big guy started out with us, but Ricco called him back.

"Gus can handle it, Bug. I want you here."

Gus opened the doorway across the hall and pushed me into the room. I heard the door close and then turned and waited for the big guy, my arms down at my sides and my hands open. Gus gathered my lapels together.

"Look, Steve, come clean."

"I didn't know about the panel," I said.

His big right hand, this time a fist, landed against my jaw and staggered me, but the left holding the lapels kept me upright. Another blow started my nose bleeding. Gus let go of me and threw a one-two, and I took both—and that was all I remember of that time.

Gus was throwing water in my face when I came to. He watched me open my eyes, and then lifted me up by the lapels again.

"Come on, Steve," he pleaded, "talk."

My mouth was swollen and the words came out mushy. "I don't know anything."

This time he butterflied my face with his open right hand—palm, backhand, palm, backhand, palm, backhand—until my head was ringing like a bicycle bell. Suddenly he let me go and swung the left into my stomach and drove the wind out. I doubled, fighting for breath, and he brought up the right in an uppercut, and I fell and tried to drag air into my lungs. When I did, he picked me up again and started the palm, backhand, palm, backhand business again. I passed out.

Water in my face brought me back, and I looked up to see Ricco.

"He threw two joes already," Gus said.

"How did you know about the panel?" Ricco asked.

"I didn't." Gus smashed a fist into my mouth and I felt my upper lip split and the salty taste of blood.

"All right," Ricco said. "I guess he don't know."

He turned on his heel and went out. Gus followed him, and was back in a minute with a wet towel.

"Ricco says you should blow, Steve. Wipe up some and I'll take you out the back way. Bug's got your car there. You make it?"

I nodded. The towel was pretty blood-stained when I finished with it.

Then Gus led me down the hall past Ricco's office, and through a storeroom to the back door. He unlocked it and we went out in the street and to my car. I got in and turned the key.

"You can drive?" Gus asked. I nodded.

As I turned the corner, I noticed the clock in a service station—the whole job had taken forty-five minutes.

CHAPTER III

I DROVE THROUGH THE RAIN slowly while the hot flush of anger rose and boiled in me until, finally, the street was blotted out with the red flood of hate, and I had to pull over to the curb and park until it passed. Then I tasted the salt of tears instead of blood—tears of frustrated hate and anger—uncontrollable, shameful tears.

It didn't help much to know that I could have marked Gus if I'd fought, that it would have taken the two of them if I'd let go. It didn't help at all. By the time I got

home, the anger was a cold thing—a hard ball in the pit of my stomach, and a lump in my throat that was hard to swallow past. I wet face towels and put them in the refrigerator, and then I locked the doors and got the bottle.

I don't drink much—one to be sociable that I nurse as long as possible. The second always calls for a third, but I can turn it down; I can even refuse the fourth, but it's harder, and after that one there isn't any stop. After that, I lose control—I lose the cold calm that gives me the control to take a beating because it's the logical and, in the long run, the easiest way.

This time, I locked the doors and put the keys on a closet shelf and got the bottle. I drank straight, and between drinks I kept the cold, wet towels on my face. And the day got hazy and finally drifted away.

The anger was too hard and too cold and too big, because when I came to I was still sitting in the easy chair in the dark of my room, a damp towel still draped across my face. I got up and staggered to the light switch. I expected to find wreckage, but there was none. The bottle had fallen on its side, but there was too little left in it to spill, and outside of that the room was just as I'd entered it. The anger had been too cold and too hard and too big to dissolve in alcohol and it was still with me.

I was thirsty. I was dizzy and maybe still somewhat drunk. It was nine-thirty at night. The night of the same day, I was sure. My beard hadn't grown enough for a whole day and a half and a night to have passed. I went into the kitchen and drank three full glasses of water, and then went to the bathroom and threw up. After that I took a shower—hot and then cold, and hot and cold again—and then dried and dressed. My stomach muscles ached, my face was a mess, both eyes puffed and black, the split in my upper lip raw, and a tooth loose—but it would probably stay in. My jaw was very tender to touch and deeply bruised.

I made and drank three cups of coffee, and then got

dark glasses, a coat and a hat, and left. Outside it had stopped raining and the stars were out, and the air had the clean, newly washed smell that comes after rain. I drove down to the Wilmar. I was still lightheaded and maybe a little drunk, but not enough to know exactly what I was doing and why, not enough to forget the cold anger. I went right up to Grange's room and knocked on the door. He answered—he'd been reading and was wearing pajamas and a robe. He looked at me and, without saying anything, stood aside so I could go in.

"Sit down, Mr. Cash—" I sat down. "What happened to you?"

"You said something about a job this morning," I said.

"You weren't interested."

"That was this morning," I said.

"I see. I suppose Ricco was responsible for your, ah, condition?" I nodded. "And now you want revenge. And you want me to pay for it."

"Your little friend got his condition at Ricco's," I said. "I'm going to get Ricco one way or another. The best way will take money, not too much, but more than I've got. If I get him it will square it for your little friend."

"You don't understand," he said. "My little friend—and by the way, they've found the body, in county territory as you predicted—took his own chances. It was a job and he was paid for it, and I'm not interested in squaring anything for him. I'm not sure I'm interested in Ricco."

"My mistake," I said and stood up.

"Sit down," he told me. I did. "You may be useful. I know enough about Coastview to know that Ricco is at least a small part of my problem, although he may have been simply the means of eliminating my agent."

He walked to the desk and brought back a paper-clipped sheaf of newspaper clippings, separated one and handed it to me.

JAIL SUICIDE

Doctor Kills Self In Cell.

Doctor Robert Grange, 37, Coastview physician and surgeon, was found dead, hanging by his belt, in a cell at the Coastview jail at six-thirty this morning. The body was discovered by Sergeant Walker Emmet when he went to wake the prisoner for breakfast.

Doctor Grange had been arrested late yesterday afternoon on a charge of performing an illegal operation. Police Chief Frank Best stated that the charge would have been changed to manslaughter as the patient died in the Coastview Hospital at ten-thirty last night.

"The prisoner had been informed of the patient's death," Best said.

When questioned about the prisoner's arrest, Best replied: "We expected Doctor Grange to be released on bail, although he refused to contact or name his lawyer. Also he denied performing the operation. He gave no indication that he contemplated suicide."

There was more, but I didn't read it. I remembered the case. Grange took the clipping from me.

"Your son?" I asked. He nodded. "Well?" I asked.

"He was murdered," Grange said. "And he was framed on that operation, he didn't perform it."

"You can't have it both ways," I said. "If they had him framed, they didn't have to murder him."

"The frame wouldn't have stuck," Grange said. "I can prove that to you. Do you remember the case?" I nodded. "Well, his nurse. . . ."

"She took a powder," I said.

"She hid, that's true, but she got in touch with me—phoned me, and I got my lawyer and came right down from San Francisco. We had to drive because the fog had

the planes grounded, and by the time we arrived, it was eight in the morning, my son was dead—murdered. That was nine days ago. After I claimed the body and made the funeral arrangements, I went back to San Francisco and hired my little friend, as you call him. He was Rosco Alp, a private detective. I'll show you the few reports he made to me, enough to prove without doubt that the charge against my son was a frameup. Then he started working on the real problem; who murdered Robert."

"Probably Sergeant Walker Emmitt," I said.

"He may have been the instrument. I want the person who ordered it done."

"That could be a tough job if the order came from Elwell himself."

"If Elwell does control things in Coastview," Grange said.

"That's a point," I agreed. "But the way things are set up in Coastview there has to be somebody running the show. None of the big four has much time for the others, and if it was just dog eat dog, one of them would end up on top. It looks like there has to be somebody with brains enough to play them against each other enough to keep the balance. Elwell would be the logical choice."

"Somebody must know for sure."

"Sure," I said. "The big four and Best, at least. The orders seem to come to Best, and Best passes them along. Like those raids on the joints. The operators don't like them. But they show who's boss, and they look good on Best's record, and it puts some swag into the city's coffers so the tax rate will stay down."

"All right, suppose Elwell is the director, Mr. Cash, and suppose he gave the orders for my son's murder. Can you prove it on him?"

"They've got a pretty delicate balance down there, Mr. Grange," I said. "It might be possible to upset it. If it is that may bring him out. If things get out of hand enough, Elwell may have to show himself to save his setup."

"And then you could get him?"

"I doubt if we'd ever be able to pin a murder on him."

"Oh? What then?"

"We might be able to get him into a situation where he'd get hurt."

"Killed?" he asked, bluntly.

"If you want it to go that far."

"If he is the one responsible, I'd want it to go that far."

"I'll do my best," I promised.

CHAPTER IV

ONCE HE'D MADE UP HIS MIND, Grange agreed to all my arrangements. He said he'd give me five grand as a start, fifteen hundred right away and the rest when he got back to San Francisco. He wanted me to tell him that would be enough, but I couldn't.

"If we can get a wedge, it will work better than money," I said. "If we can't, we'll have to bribe and buy. It might cost a lot less or a lot more. And you'll just have to take my word on where the dough goes. I won't be able to get any signed receipts. And I want Alp's reports, if any."

"He submitted two to me," Grange said.

"And I want all the clippings you've got, and any letters your son wrote you during the last three months."

"The clippings are here and I'll mail the letters."

"Box 600, Hollywood Annex," I told him, "and don't put on a return address. Is the nurse still around?"

"Yes."

"I want her address—I want to talk to her."

"Alp did, and her story is in affidavit form. I have it here."

"I'll take that, but I still want to talk to her."

He wrote the address on the back of one of his cards and put it with a sheaf of clippings and papers and handed them to me. I rewrote the nurse's address in my notebook. Judy Delburt, Venus Apts., 1610 N. Western Ave., Apt. 12; and then tore his card up and put the pieces in the ashtray. He smiled at me.

"You have any idea why they'd kill your son?" I asked.

"None."

"Did Alp?"

"No. He first established my son's innocence in the matter of the operation. He didn't get beyond that before his murder."

He balked at my final order. I wanted him to go back to San Francisco right away, in the morning.

"I want to be here," he said.

"If you aet like Alp's death scared you off," I said, "it'll make it easier for us. You can't help any other way—especially dead."

"I'm not afraid."

"I wish I could say that. Go back to San Francisco—I'll get you back here for the finish."

It took a lot more argument than that, but he finally agreed and I gathered up my papers, shook his hand and went to the door.

"I'm putting a lot of trust in you, Cash," he told me.

"Sure," I agreed, "and I appreciate it. If it'll help you, you might remember that I've got a pretty personal interest in this thing now."

He didn't say anything, so I left.

When I got to bed, I couldn't sleep. I had the feeling that I'd let my anger run me and my tongue, and I knew the job was too big and too tough for me. They had too much against me, too much at stake, too much to lose to let me upset their game. I'd be fighting windmills. And when I did sleep it was full of bad dreams.

And I woke, tired, and bathed in my own sweat.

I spent the next three days at home, nursing my face

back to something normal, and I had plenty of time to study the material Grange had given me. Alp's reports and Judy Delburt's story proved that the arrest of Doctor Grange was a frameup and not a very good one.

Daisy Eller, a domestic employed by Mrs. Owen Broadford of Coastview, had been brought to the Coastview Hospital when she had collapsed at her place of work. She was found to be hemorrhaging. The examining doctor, Milton Bayler, resident physician at Coastview, said that the girl told him that Doctor Robert Grange had performed an abortion on her four days previously at his, Grange's, office. She wanted him called. Bayler was the only one who was present when the girl told him that story. He called the police and they had him call Grange. When Grange came to the hospital, he was placed under arrest.

Alp had talked to Mrs. Broadford. She said the girl had asked her for the afternoon off, just four days before her collapse, explaining that she was going to a doctor to have a cyst removed. That day, Saturday, Doctor Grange had been in Santa Barbara and had not arrived back until the following morning. Alp showed positive proof of this.

The girl was unconscious when the ambulance had picked her up. She was unconscious when Grange arrived at the hospital. Alp was satisfied that she had never regained consciousness, and so could not have told the story Bayler claimed she did. Alp didn't offer any proof for this assumption.

The closing paragraph of Alp's second report read:

"The Eller girl was entered at the hospital at twelve-twenty, and Doctor Grange was not called until a quarter of five. It is my opinion that he was not called until the girl's condition was considered hopeless, and there was no chance of her recovering and denying the story told by Doctor Bayler."

The clippings provided some background on Doctor Robert Grange. He was single. He had graduated from

the U. of C. Medical College, interned at the Los Angeles County Hospital. He'd spent two years at St. Luke's Hospital in Pasadena, and then took a commission as First Lieutenant in the Army Medical Corps. That was in January of 1942. He'd served five years, and after his discharge had joined the staff of the Milton Memorial Hospital in Bay City. He'd been there two years, and then had opened offices in Coastview. He'd practiced there nineteen months. Miss Delburt had been in his employ since a week after he opened the Coastview office.

I spent most of my time those three days trying to dredge up what I knew, and had been told, about the setup in Coastview—the backgrounds of the big four, Best and Elwell, their women and their weaknesses. I knew and had heard a lot, but none of it could be taken into a court—at least, not by me—none of it was backed up by presentable facts. But some of it might be helpful.

There was Best's wife, who was a nymph and a juice hound; there was Brant's ambition to be as big as Mike Moran, and Moran's determination that he shouldn't; there were Elwell's two daughters, Best's wife and the one who was attending a very exclusive women's college in the East; there was Ricco's girl, Stella Regan, and there was the one she'd replaced; there was Tony Moss' brother wanted on a murder charge by at least two states, and still at large.

By Monday morning, my face was presentable enough to go out; my eyes were still purple ringed, and the bruises were still dark on my jaw, but I could get by without stopping a crowd. And that morning's mail brought me the letters from Grange's son, and a check for thirty-five hundred, airmailed from San Francisco. I picked them up at the box in Hollywood and read them while I had coffee and toast at a one-armed greasy spoon.

There were four letters, but only the last, written two days before his death, had anything of interest—and even that was vague. The part that counted read:

"Well, Dad, I've known for a long time that Coast-

view was a cesspool, but today I really found out how bad it is. I don't have any facts, just what I saw and heard and there's no use making a lot of charges until I'm able to back them up. And that depends on my seeing someone today. I'll write you all the details as soon as possible."

I went back to the Post Office and scribbled a note to Grange asking him about his son's papers and office equipment, and whether he thought the office had been searched when he saw it.

Then I went to the Venus Apartments to talk to Judy Delburt.

She was thirtyish, five six in medium heels, and lean as to figure. Her hair was short and brown, curled close to her head, and the face was thin and saved only by her eyes—large, deep brown, and really beautiful. She wore slacks that were too big, and a brown turtleneck sweater that didn't do a thing for her. Her shoes were white nurse's shoes, out of place in that get-up. She looked at my card and then let me in.

"I'd given you up," she said. "Mr. Grange phoned and said you wanted to talk to me, but that was several days ago."

The apartment was a living room, kitchen, and bedroom affair—small, furnished the way furnished apartments are furnished, and lacked anything personal except the mess. It wasn't a dirty mess, just the natural untidiness of two people living on a day to day basis. I moved some newspapers from an easy chair and sat down. Judy had already perched herself on the somewhat worn sofa.

"I was busy trying to get started on this thing," I lied. "Do you think Grange committed suicide?"

"Oh, no. No, he was killed."

"Do you think that because his father does, or because you have some facts of your own?"

"I knew Doctor Grange, and I know he wouldn't kill himself. Especially not over something he didn't do."

"Wouldn't the publicity, the charge itself, tend to discredit him?" I asked.

"But it wasn't true; he wasn't even in town when it happened."

"All right. In that statement you made to Alp, you said you tried to keep him from going to the hospital. Why?"

"Well, he said he didn't like it."

"That was all?"

"No," she said. "I just had a feeling that he shouldn't go. I can't explain it. But it was the same feeling that made me drive past the hospital on my way home."

"You lived where in Coastview?"

"The Surfsound Apartments—on Highland."

"How many apartments are in the building?" I asked.

"Why, ten, I think."

"And still you knew that the police car parked in front of the place was waiting for you?"

She was getting a little angry at the line my questions were taking.

"It seemed very logical to me, Mr. Cash. I'd just seen the Doctor being taken by the police, and then there was a police car in front of where I lived, and I just put two and two together. You *are* working for Mr. Grange, aren't you?"

"Sure. You didn't stop at your apartment?"

"Of course not."

"You drove into Los Angeles. Where?"

"Here, this apartment."

"And you phoned the Doctor's father from here?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You knew his phone number?"

"I knew his address—I'd typed several envelopes for letters the Doctor had written him. What's the idea of these questions?"

"What did you tell Mr. Grange?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake! I told him the Doctor had been arrested and I was worried about it."

"So," I said, "even though it was foggy and he couldn't get a plane out, what you told him was important enough for him to get his lawyer and drive all night to get here?"

"I suppose he thought so, and, as it turned out, it was important."

"Didn't you actually tell Mr. Grange why the Doctor was arrested?" She started to answer, but I went on. "I wasn't thinking too well when I last saw Grange, and I didn't ask him, but I can now easily enough, you know."

"Maybe I did," her voice was almost a whisper.

"And how did you know?" I asked..

She sat with her head bowed, not answering, not looking at me.

"Don't you think you ought to tell me the truth?" I asked.

"I have," she whispered.

"No," I said. "And if you'd told Alp the truth, he might be alive today."

CHAPTER V

THERE WAS A LONG SILENCE while she sat with her head bowed and I waited, wondering if, by some effort of will, she'd managed not to hear me.

"Start from the beginning," I told her. "Did the Doctor really get a phone call from the hospital?"

"Yes. And he said it was strange and he didn't like it, and I tried to get him not to go."

"Why?"

"I told the truth about that, it was just a feeling. Then he said he had to go and for me to lock up and go home.

And he left. About five minutes after he left someone phoned me." She paused, but I didn't say anything. "I was told that the Doctor was going to be arrested as soon as he got to the hospital, and that the charge was performing an illegal operation. And I was told that as soon as he was picked up, the police were going to my place and arrest me. I was told to get out of town. I . . . I came here."

"And called Grange?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You didn't drive by the hospital, or your apartment?"

"No. I left the office as quickly as possible and came right here."

"Who called you and gave you the tip?"

"I can't tell you."

"Goddammit," I shouted, "you're going to tell me."

"You haven't any right to . . ."

"How much blood do you want on your hands? Do you want me murdered too? Do you think I'm going to walk into Coastview with my eyes closed? Tell me!"

She didn't look up.

"The name on the mailbox downstairs," I said, "is Helen Vogel. She must have a connection, a close connection, with him to take you in on his orders. I'll find him through her. It'll take time and money, but I've got both. And when I find who he is, it lets him out—it lets both of you out."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't be on their side and expect consideration from me," I said. "If and when I have to, I'll throw him to them—they'll like knowing who tipped you."

"They'll kill him."

"Probably. And I'll give them you, too. I guess they still want you."

"His name . . . If I tell you, you'll keep it secret?"

"I won't bargain, because I don't have to. If I can keep him out of it, I will; I won't promise anything else."

"His name is Peter Vogel."

"What is he?"

"He's on the Coastview Police Force. He's the day desk Sergeant."

"Helen's his sister?" Judy nodded. "All right. When did you see him again after he gave you the warning?"

"The same evening. He came here about seven-thirty."

"You talked about the arrest?"

"Of course."

"Did he know it was a frameup?"

"No."

"Did you tell him?"

"Yes."

"I don't like to pull teeth," I said. "Tell me without all this questioning."

"He told me all about the girl, and how she was taken to the hospital, and what Doctor Bayler said she said, and he asked me if I'd been in the office when the operation was done. I told him we didn't have a patient named Eller, and when he told me the date she was supposed to have been to the office, I remembered that Doctor Grange had been in Santa Barbara, and I told him that."

"And so signed the Doctor's death warrant," I said.

"What?"

"Peter went back and told them that the frame wouldn't fit, and so they killed him. How do you like it?"

"It isn't true."

"You've seen him since?" I asked.

"Several times."

"And you told him about Alp."

"Yes," she said. "I told him Mr. Grange had hired a detective to prove that the charge against his son was false."

"And that his son was murdered?"

"Yes," she was whispering again.

"And so you set Alp up for them. Did Grange tell you how the little man died?"

"Please."

"Did he?"

"Yes. But Peter didn't tell them about Alp—I know he didn't."

"You in love with this Vogel?" I asked.

She looked up. "Yes," she said. "And he's in love with me."

"That's the best arrangement," I said. "When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday evening."

I smiled a very tight little smile at her. "And," I said, "of course you told him about me?"

"I told Peter that Mr. Grange had hired another detective."

"Tell him my name?"

"Yes. I told him Mr. Grange phoned and told me to expect a Mr. Cash. He said you were working for us and wanted to talk to me."

"And Peter gave you some instructions?" I asked.

"He told me to tell the same story I'd told Alp."

"And he knew Alp was dead, and how he'd died?"

"Just what was in the papers about it. Peter said it didn't have anything to do with Coastview, it was in the county."

"But you know better," I said.

"I don't. I don't know where Alp went or what he did. I don't even know that he went to Coastview. I asked him to try and get me some clothes from my apartment, but he didn't. How do you and Mr. Grange know that Alp's death had anything to do with Coastview?"

"It's rather obvious," I said.

"It isn't to me. Peter told me he didn't tell anyone about Alp. He told me he couldn't without telling them how he knew, and that would betray me."

"The connection between Alp's death and Coastview seemed obvious enough for you to ask Peter about it, didn't it?" I asked.

"Yes, at first. But I believe Peter. He didn't tell them about Alp."

"All right," I said. "How about the Doctor's murder? What does Peter say about that?"

"I don't know."

"Don't be a damned fool," I said. "You told him Grange thinks his son was murdered—you think so yourself. Don't tell me you didn't talk to Peter about it."

"Peter doesn't know anything about it."

"Except," I said, "that he was the one who took them the information that the frameup was sour. Information that you gave him, and information that killed the Doctor just as sure as if you'd stabbed him in the heart. He's as much a murderer as the rest of them."

"He's not, he's not, he's not; he didn't tell them, he didn't, he didn't, he didn't! He didn't leave here until after midnight, and by that time . . ."

She stopped with her mouth open, shocked and numb with her realization—and slowly a look of pure horror washed over her face, her eyes wide and staring as though my face had dissolved into a mass of squirming, writhing maggots.

" . . . the Doctor was dead," I finished for her.

CHAPTER VI

"OH, GOD—OH, GOD!" and then she broke into sobs, body-shaking, face-contorting sobs, and I sat and watched her and waited for it to end so I could get the rest. I'd seen women cry before, and it wasn't as bad as when a man cried; or when I'd cried myself—nothing was that bad.

And finally it tapered off into silence broken only by irregular, sharply indrawn breaths. Then she managed, "Please leave me alone, please."

"I have to know about it," I said. "Tell it without making me drag it out."

"You'll keep it a secret?"

"No bargains," I said. "I'll do what I have to."

"They'd kill him."

"Tell it," I said.

"Peter had borrowed a police car to come over here. He left here a little after midnight, and on the way he stopped and got some coffee and donuts to take to Walker Emmet—he knew Walker would be alone then. He parked the car in the basement garage and went upstairs by the back stairway. He had to go past the cell section, so he decided to look in and see if the Doctor was awake—he told me he was going to tell the Doctor that I'd phoned Mr. Grange and that I'd remembered he was away the day he was supposed to have operated on the girl. He heard noises from the cell and when he looked in, he saw them hanging the Doctor." She sobbed again.

"Them?" I asked.

"Two men," she said. "He didn't get much of a look because he got out right away. He said he went on up to the desk room and waited, and in a little while Walker came in. Peter said he told Walker that he'd just come in the front way. The other man must have gone out the back way because Peter said he didn't go through the desk room. He doesn't know who the man was."

"Peter didn't make much noise," I said.

"He was wearing loafer shoes with rubber soles."

"Walker didn't say anything about the Doctor?"

"No. But they know that Peter knows there's something funny about the deal. He was on the desk when Dr. Grange was booked, and he told me it was a regular routine booking. He meant that he took the Doctor's belt and personal belongings just like he did with everyone."

"Was there any trouble about the fingerprints?" I asked.

"No. And nobody has said anything to him about that,

or the belt. He said they take it for granted that he knows enough to keep quiet. So you see, he didn't tell them about the Doctor being away that day, and he didn't tell them about Alp."

"He's sure he didn't know the other man in the cell with Walker?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Weren't there any other prisoners in the cells?"

"That's another thing Peter told me," she said. "There were three when he went off duty—four, counting the Doctor. The next morning the books showed that the three had been released right after he left."

"What's he going to do about this?" I asked.

"What can he do?"

"I don't know. I don't want you to tell him I've talked to you."

"But he's on our side, really."

"Sure. That's why he told you to lie to Alp."

"He was afraid that if Mr. Grange knew the truth he'd make it public. There isn't any proof but Peter's word against Walker's and the rest of them. And they'd kill him."

I got up. "I'll want to talk to you again," I told her. "Remember, don't tell Peter I've been here."

"I won't."

"I don't trust you," I said. "And if you do tell Peter, you'd better tell him the whole thing. Tell him, that I'm not a lone wolf; I'll put all this down and fix it so that if anything happens to me, his friends in Coastview will get it."

"That's not fair."

"Then don't tell him. I'll manage to stay out of trouble if they haven't got advance information. You going to stay here?"

"Yes. I'm still wanted in Coastview, at least as far as Peter can find out."

"Helen Vogel isn't here during the day?"

"No, not until after five in the afternoon."

"Okay. Give me back my card." She handed it to me and I walked to the door. "I'll be back," I told her.

"All right," she said, but the tone of her voice told me that she wasn't going to miss me if I didn't. I went down to my car and drove to Coastview.

CHAPTER VII

THE COASTVIEW POLICE STATION is a red brick building set in the center of a well-kept, always green, expanse of lawn. The "Keep Off The Grass" signs are small and not too insistent looking. This day, in spite of the recent rain, the sprinklers were busy creating thousands of rainbows against the sun, and the grass looked greener and smoother than real grass. The air was quiet and still and peaceful, and the red brick building looked clean and inviting, and it was hard to think of the darkness of the cell and two men hanging a body—but a breathing body—up by the belt so that the autopsy would show the proper cause of death. It seemed strange that the air smelt fresh and clean in Coastview, strange that the ocean breeze, like a divinely appointed vigilante, labored to keep the smog banked above Los Angeles and away from the clear blue of the Coastview skies.

I didn't stop at the desk room to see Sergeant Peter Vogel. But I was there in that neat brick building in Coastview because of him—because I couldn't be sure he hadn't already told them that I was on the case for Grange. But beyond that I had to trust Judy Delburt, a woman in love, and I didn't like it. If they didn't know I'd talked to her, and they didn't find out through Peter Vogel later, what I was going to do made sense; but if Judy talked, and Peter was in with them, I was going to

be caught out on a high limb with only one way off.

I went right up to the second floor where Chief Frank Best had his offices. The girl at the desk in the outer office was a pugnosed, scrubbed-looking, pert-faced Mick-shapely, small, and impudent.

"Is it important?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Then I'll see if he's not busy."

She was gone less than a minute.

"Go right in, Mr. Cash."

Chief Best liked comfort, and his office showed it. The desk was bare and big, and usually held nothing but his feet. There was a cabinet bar and four big blue leather easy chairs in the room.

He lounged in a padded swivel-chair. He was a big man, bigger now with the fat of soft living. He'd been a patrol-car cop in Coastview and then had gone into the M.P.'s during the war. He'd come out of that a Major. His pull in Coastview was through Tom Elwell—Frank was married to one of Elwell's two daughters, and he'd been appointed Chief four years before, when the former Chief retired to a ten thousand acre ranch in Imperial Valley. The job was sort of a wedding present for Frank.

He looked smooth, and well-groomed and properly proud of his success. In reality, he was not too bright, and his appearance was the result of a lot of work and attention on his wife's part. Left alone, he'd have been fat and sloppy. He could do anything he was told to do, but keep his mouth shut, and, as a consequence, and after a few foot-in-mouth remarks to reporters, Elwell had chained a censor to him. Best was a direct person whose idea of subtlety was his behind-the-back name for Elwell—Superchief.

Best's censor was in the office with him, a brash young onetime reporter for the Coastview News, who boasted the title of Press Representative, and this for the Chief of a twenty-six man force. The Press Representative's name was Marvin Hope.

I sat in an easy chair in front of Best's desk, and Hope stood behind me, a position that he usually assumed so he could give the Chief signals. You didn't have to see Hope to know when the sign was given; when it was, the Chief stopped with his mouth open, held it for a few seconds and then said, "Well . . ." and Hope would break in with, "What the Chief means is . . ." They made a nice team.

Best looked at me, and then asked, "What happened to you?"

That simple question meant a lot to me. It meant that the Chief *didn't* know what had happened to me; he'd have ignored my bruises if he had. And that, in turn, meant that the cops hadn't found Alp outside of Ricco's, because Best would have been told. And finally, I could figure that the beating I took was Ricco's own idea and not on higher orders, and that Ricco didn't want anybody to know Alp had taken that little walk before he died; he especially didn't want the one who'd ordered the carving work done on Alp to know. So I decided to plant my story with Best. I knew it would get to whoever put the sign on Alp, and they'd know why Ricco was so concerned about the panel. And they'd probably take it up with Ricco. A nice thought.

"Gus Ventizes worked me over for Ricco," I said. And I went on to tell Best the same story I'd given Ricco, the same lies. Best listened without too much interest.

"You think I . . ." He stopped with his mouth open, and then said, "Well . . ."

" . . . What the Chief means," Hope's voice behind me said, "is do you want to make a complaint?"

"Yeah," Best echoed, "you want to make a complaint?"

"Not me," I said. "I figure I was in the wrong. I should have waited and told Ricco about the panel. Hell, Chief, he probably had plenty of reason to be worried about who went out."

"Yeah, that Ricco can't forget he's related to Capone.

If I had my way, I'd knock him over for good. He doesn't stay . . . Well . . ."

"What the Chief means," Hope said, "is why tell him about it if you don't want to make a complaint?"

"Yeah, why tell me about it?"

"I thought you asked me what happened," I said. "I thought you wanted to know."

The Chief got another signal, and this time he figured it out for himself.

"Then what do you want?" he asked.

"I've been hired by Howard Grange," I said. And I couldn't figure out from the Chief's expression whether this was news to him or not.

"Grange?"

"His son," I said, "Doctor Robert Grange, committed suicide in your jail."

"Oh, that Grange. Yeah."

"What the Chief means . . ." Hope started, and I turned to him.

"Look, Hope," I interrupted, "why don't you come around and join in. I'm not a reporter and there's only the three of us here, so it'll be your and the Chief's word against mine, even if I were stupid enough to carry tales."

He pulled a chair up beside the desk and sat down facing me.

"Well, what about Grange?" the Chief asked.

"He wants his son's name cleared," I said.

"What's that mean?" Hope asked.

"You know he hired a private operator, Rosco Alp," I said. I didn't give them a chance to deny that they knew it. "And Alp turned up enough evidence to prove that the Doctor couldn't have performed that operation." I waited to see if they'd argue about that—they didn't. "So," I went on, "Grange would like to have the Coast-view Police admit that the arrest was a mistake."

"He was blowing his top about his son being murdered," the Chief said.

"Well," I lied, "I think Alp sold him that idea. Alp's

job was over unless he could convince Grange that there'd been a murder."

"Did Alp have anything to base his idea on?" Hope asked.

"I didn't know Alp, didn't talk to him," I said. "But Grange didn't offer me any concrete evidence, so I don't think he got any from Alp. Alp turned up dead, you know."

"In county territory," the Chief said.

"But dead," I said, "and pretty well worked over." I waited to let them think about it. "I don't understand that part of it," I lied again, "but I think Alp was probably up to his ears in something—something that didn't have anything to do with Grange's business. Anyway, old man Grange has got the stuff he turned up that proves the Doctor's innocent. If you'll make a statement to the press to the effect that your investigations have cleared the Doctor, it'll wind the whole thing up. I'll get paid, and Grange will be out of your hair."

"I don't know," the Chief said.

"Grange's nurse is still on the lam," Hope said.

"Is she wanted?" I asked.

"For questioning."

"We could probably get her to come in," I said, "but she'd be flanked by a couple of lawyers and maybe a reporter or two."

"Suppose we make that statement," Hope said, "and forget about the nurse; what about the idea Alp sold Grange about murder?"

"I've talked him out of that," I said.

"The statement winds it up then?"

"All Grange wants is his son's name cleared."

"Maybe we can do some business along that line," Hope said. "I'll let you know."

"When?"

"This evening. Where can I call you about six-thirty?"

I gave him my home number. "I hope you'll decide to play it this way," I said. "It'll settle the thing for good."

"You don't want to make your job last like Alp did?" Hope asked.

"Not me." I got up and walked to the door. "I expect you to call then," I said.

"Sure," Hope said, "Either way I'll let you know."

I went out and down the stairs and to my car, and for the first time I began to feel good about the case. They were going to be easier than I'd thought, not a cinch, but not impossible.

Hope was going to call after he'd talked to Elwell, and I knew they'd take my way out. That would give them the idea that it was over, and my job with Grange was done, and I'd be able to go into Coastview without having a roof fall on me. But that wasn't the reason I felt good.

Neither the Chief nor Hope had asked me to produce the evidence Alp had turned up. And they should have because they weren't supposed to know what it was. That was the thing—even for me they should have kept the front up, and they hadn't.

They were getting careless, and careless people are easier to catch. Ask almost any wife.

CHAPTER VIII

I LEFT THE POLICE STATION and drove down to the crummy section of Coastview. Sure, they had one. It wasn't as crummy as the average skidrow, but it was enough. There weren't too many stewbums and winos, because the cops made a regular collection of them and dumped them across the county line. But there were the cheap bars, and the business-in-a-hat bookies, and the hock shops, and a burlesque theater. And back of this street, Ocean

Avenue, there were the crowded, unkept buildings that housed the poor. Coastview had poor, too.

The bar I chose was Pete's, a dim, smelly place where the whiskey was watered, and the beer lukewarm. Pete was in business because the slots and punchboards in his place caught enough nickels so he could pay his dues. And I went to his place because he was ambitious. He was a little punk who wanted to be big.

I ordered a beer, and watched him while he opened it and slid the bottle across the bar to me. He was a dark, thin little man with mean shifty eyes and a tight mouth. That last didn't mean anything; he liked to talk.

"What's new?" I asked.

"Ricco got knocked over last week," Pete said.

"I know."

"Best done it without orders."

"He can get away with it," I said.

"Not this time. This time he got told."

I said, "Yeah."

With Pete a lot of things he said were wishful thinking. It would suit his desires to have a breach between Best and Ricco because it might end in Ricco's exit. Pete's best chance to grow was into Ricco's shoes. Not that he ever would—there were too many too far ahead of him on that path, but it was a nice daydream. Talking about it probably made it seem more likely.

"I got it straight, Steve. Best was warned off, even though Ricco held out on the payoff. Ricco says he ain't hardly making the nut."

"That place of his is a gold mine," I said.

"Sure. But that dame of his is breaking him." Pete's eyes were greedy. "She dropped six grand at the Palace crap tables last night alone."

"She there much?" I asked.

"Every night."

"Well," I said, "he doesn't have to worry. Somebody likes him well enough to take Best off his back. You couldn't get away with cutting the payoff."

"Hell, no. I'm a day late I got a cop here checking my license."

I figured daydreaming could work both ways, and planting an idea with Pete was a better way to get it circulated than publication in the Coastview News itself.

"I hear Walker Emmitt is on his way up," I said. "Maybe Best is going to retire."

"Yeah? Best won't take that laying down. Emmitt is Moss's boy."

"Best will take what he has to," I said.

"Sure. But Moran likes Best right where he is, and Moran's got a lot of say around here."

"I hear it isn't Best that Moran likes," I said.

"That ain't healthy talk, Steve."

"I didn't start it," I said. "And the way I heard it, it didn't seem to be much of a secret—even from Best."

"I don't want to talk about it, Steve," Pete said.

But I knew he would—he was a gossip, and the rumor was a juicy one; that Moran was sharing Clara Best with the Chief. Or maybe not even sharing, because the talk was that Clara was always too tanked when the Chief was around.

"I'd think that Elwell would keep Clara away from Big Mike," I said, "even if Best can't."

"Hell," Pete said, "the Superchief ain't got any control over his daughters, never has had. And besides, Moran is his enforcer, at least when Brant ain't."

I pumped Pete for another half hour, but I didn't get anything else except that, in his opinion, Ricco got away with cutting his payoff because Moss backed him up, and nobody wanted too much trouble. But Pete didn't offer any reason why Moss would back Ricco against Best.

The whole conversation was another indication of carelessness. In the older, tougher days, Pete wouldn't have dared to spout off, even if what he said was strictly hogwash. In those days, they'd have kept his mouth shut one way or another. They were too cocky, and I liked it.

I drove back to my office and killed the rest of the day there. Nothing interesting happened, except that the late afternoon papers carried a story about Doctor Robert Grange. It was tucked back into the inside pages and I didn't bother to clip it to send to Grange. It was written to give the impression that Best and his police had worked hard proving that the Doctor was innocent. And it carried a short quote from the Chief about how the investigation was now closed. It was fast work and I wondered if Hope would bother to call me.

On my way to my apartment, I stopped and got the mail from the Hollywood box. There was a short note from Grange, telling me that the Doctor's papers were in San Francisco, and that the office didn't seem to have been searched. He also asked me to make a full report of my activities.

At the market, I picked up some hamburger and a can of mushroom soup and then drove to the apartment. There I started fixing meat patties to fry. The doorbell interrupted me. I answered it.

The guy was short and plump, his face was deeply tanned, and his hair bleached by the sun. He was smiling, a nice smile, but it didn't keep his eyes from being wise. He shoved a fat hand at me.

"Hi, Steve. I was by the office, but I missed you."

"Come on in," I said. He was Squint Lewis, a private operator who ran a two-man agency with an office in Hollywood.

He walked in and picked a spot on my sofa and made himself comfortable. I offered him a drink, and fixed a bourbon and water when he accepted. He sipped it, and watched me as I sat, opposite him, across the coffee table.

"Well?" I asked.

"I picked up a story in Coastview," he said. I didn't say anything. "About your getting Grange's name cleared through Best."

"So?"

"I wondered about Alp."

"What do you know about Alp?"

"I know he was working for Grange, and I know he's dead."

"So?"

"Let's don't fence, Steve. If you're working for Grange, and if you're going to do something about Alp, I want to throw in with you."

"Why?" I asked.

"In the first place, I don't like what happened to Alp—I wouldn't like it happening to any private operator, it makes us all look bad if we don't do something about it." I nodded. "And besides, I knew Alp and I liked him. We used his Frisco office when we had to and he used us. He was a nice guy, and he had a lot of guts. He got it in Coastview—I know because I saw him the morning before he turned up dead. He wanted help, and I wish to God I'd given it to him. As it was, all I did was tell him to lay-off Coastview."

I needed all the help I could get, and trust, and Squint was a good man in any situation.

"All right," I said, "I'm working for Grange and I'm going to hang Alp's murder on the Coastview crowd—if I can," I added. Then I gave him a rundown on the whole story—what I'd done, what I'd found out, and some of what I wanted to do. And, telling it, I realized that I didn't have very much.

"Did Alp have anything to go on, Squint?" I asked.

"No. He told me that he was going to Coastview to check on Doctor Grange's activities after he got back from Santa Barbara. He wanted me to check at St. Vincent's Hospital on how much time Grange spent there Monday morning. Then I was supposed to go from there, trace him right up to the time he was arrested. I didn't want any part of it, and told Alp so, and I tried to get him to brush the job too. He wouldn't—he said he was sure he had a wedge, and there was reward dough in the set-

up. If I didn't know him better, I'd have figured he was drunk or hopped up."

"No hint about what the wedge was?" I asked.

"No. As soon as I turned the job down, he clammed up. That's all, Steve, but I wish I'd helped him."

"Sure."

"Wait. He left a magazine on my desk, and it had a sort of schedule in it. I was going to send it to Grange, but I got busy."

"A magazine?"

"Yeah—Factual Detective. You want it?"

"And the list," I said.

"I'll bring it. Where do we go from here?"

"Do you know what kind of dice they use at the Palace?" I asked.

"Yeah. White bone, black spots. I don't know the size number, but I could pick them out."

"Can you get me a pair of queers that'll pass there?" I asked.

"Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"I can, but it'd be quicker to step in front of a truck."

"Get the dice and meet me back here about eight to-night."

"You're the brain. You want them cornered or loaded?"

"Loaded," I said. "Every roll a seven."

"Sure death," he said.

"I hope so," I told him.

CHAPTER IX

I HAD SHOWERED, SHAVED, and was dressed in a navy blue suit, black shoes, white shirt, and undertaker's tie by the time Squint got back. He gave me the dice, and I tested

them; every roll a seven—six and one. I gave Squint some instructions about my plans for the night.

"It might start something," I said, "and it might not, but we have to try everything. Any ideas you've got will help."

"Nothing offhand, Steve, but I'll think about it. You may be making like a clay pigeon, you know."

"Sure. But if I do, you'll have to carry on. Call here in the morning before nine, or my office after that."

• "If you're around."

"Yeah. If I'm not, have Grange stop payment on the checks and he can give you new ones. I'll see you at the Palace in about an hour."

The Palace was the class in Coastview, a big, Spanish-type building, white plaster and red tile, and extensively flowered grounds and a big parking lot. The only sign was a small neon one over the main gate. I parked and went in. There was a bar and a dining-room, and beyond that a large gambling setup with roulette, blackjack and crap tables, and another bar and a buffet. The slots were in a separate room, thirty or forty of them, and two attendants to make change and keep the machines running. Beyond the big gambling room was a smaller one, equipped with three poker tables where the games were unlimited. The whole place was very high class, and most of the people wore formal clothes.

I spotted Ricco's girl, Stella Regan, as soon as I walked into the big gambling room. She was at one of the crap tables—a tall, redhead who'd been poured into a strapless gold dress, so that her qualifications for her work were easily appraised. She was too generously endowed to interest *Vogue*, but then that's a woman's magazine. Stella was no woman's woman. Her face, when you noticed it, wasn't beautiful, but her lips were invitingly red and her eyes suggestive if she was interested. She took good care of what she had, so that she didn't look too hard. She was about twenty-eight, and before she'd hooked Ricco she'd displayed her body in various stages

of undress in various jobs—cigarette girl, hatcheck girl, an ill-fated musical, several sessions in night club lines. And before Ricco, there'd been an L.A. mobster whose career was cut short by a shotgun blast. Ricco had picked her up from there, discarding a blonde named Honey Kane at the time. And at the time, the wise money said Stella wouldn't last more than a few months, Ricco being somewhat noted for his fast turnover in dames. She'd been with him almost two years now, and still had him jumping when she snapped her fingers.

She only had one talent, but it was a good one.

I looked her over, and then spotted Gus Ventizes at the bar. He looked uncomfortable in dress clothes, was nursing a drink, and had a bale of mink draped over one arm. I stood beside him.

"Hi, Gus."

"Hi, Steve."

"Night off?" I asked.

"Keeping an eye on the queen. You snooping?"

"Here to make my fortune," I said.

I ordered a beer and drank it with Gus. Then I wandered into the slot room and dropped five dollars worth of dimes into one of the machines. In the big room again, I spotted Squint and then walked over to the crap table where Stella was playing. I had to wait ten minutes before a space on her right opened up. I slipped into it and waited for the dice to reach me. They were three players away.

When they did reach me, I risked five dollars. I rolled a six, and Stella bet with me to make it, and I made it on the third roll. The next roll I sevens, and Stella was with me again. Then I rolled a nine and crapped out two rolls after that.

She didn't do as well. Her first roll was box cars. Her next got her a five point, and she crapped out after four rolls. I lost ten with her. She was betting chips, the pastel green ones that at the Palace were worth a hundred bucks a copy. There was no limit at this table, and she

was betting three and four chips at a time. I played mostly against the player as the dice went around the table again. The stick man, I noticed, usually pushed the dice back to the player without picking them up. During the time the dice traveled through six players getting to me, he picked them up only twice. Stella didn't do much betting as the dice moved—a few hundred, and that bet with the player. When the dice were at the player next to me, I got my queers and a cigarette out of my pocket. I just had time to light up and take a drag when the stick man pushed the cubes at me. I dropped the weed and shook the dice, risking five again. I rolled a ten, rolled three times and made it. The next roll was a four, and I saw that Stella was betting with me. I switched to the queers and they came up seven and the stick man pushed them to Stella. It didn't look like the switch had been spotted. I bet my five against Stella and she rolled a seven. I bet against her again, and she popped another seven. She was doubling her bets now, and the next roll I bet with her. I felt a hand on my left shoulder, the middle finger tapped twice, and I put the pair of dice I'd switched into Squint's right hand and, after watching Stella's next two sevens, he walked away. That wasn't seen either.

The stick man let her roll seven straight passes before he picked up the dice, mostly because she was bouncing them against the end away from him and could reach them again without his help. I noticed him lay the queers aside and throw a new pair onto the table, and, although it was barely a motion, I saw the signal to the stooge. And I also saw the handoff of the queers to the stooge.

Stella, meanwhile, rolled a four and made it in five rolls, then a nine and made that in three, and then an eleven. The stick man picked up the dice again, but this time he didn't change them. Stella rolled a five and crapped out two rolls later. She'd won a lot of money. And the stooge was back.

"Miss Regan," he said, "Mr. Moran would like to see you in his office."

"I'm playing," she said.

"He won't keep you long."

"All right," she said. She looked and spotted Gus at the bar and motioned him over. "Cash me in," she said. And she turned and followed the stooge out of the big room to the hallway and Moran's office. I kept playing.

When Gus got the chips and moved out, a man took Stella's place. The dice went around the table twice, and I made a little each time, and just as I got the cubes again, I saw the stooge at my shoulder. He waited until I finished my turn, and then told me Moran wanted to see me.

I carried my silver and chips to the cashier's window and exchanged them for bills. I didn't see Squint, and I followed the stooge out of the room and down the short hallway to Moran's office.

It was a big office, furnished in Monterey to keep the Spanish theme of the place. Moran was behind a big desk, and Stella, sullen and angry, slumped on a leather covered sofa.

Moran was a big, black-haired, square-jawed Irishman with a perpetual five o'clock shadow. His smile was an appealing one-sided greeting, and his eyes were as blue and as innocent as a baby's. He spoke with a soft brogue that was ninety percent fake, and apt to disappear when he lost his temper. For an Irishman, that was seldom. He'd come up the hard way, and a bent ear and a scar on his cheek showed some of it. He had enough brains to know that peace and cooperation were good for business, and so, in spite of his ambition to be top dog, he shared Coastview with the other three. He'd learned that the hard way too. A long time before, he'd tried to take everything for himself, and Elwell had to call Brant in against Moran. It had been a strangely quiet war, but there wasn't any doubt who'd won; Moran had held his own, but he hadn't gained, and Brant had moved up.

Talk had it that Moran didn't forget easily; talk had it that Moran was waiting a chance at Elwell and Brant. But now, at least, Moran was the enforcer for Best and Elwell. And Brant was the check rein on him.

With Moran and Stella in the office was Danny Shay, Moran's right bower. A tall, thin, blond Irishman, deadpanned and dangerous, with icy green eyes and thin lips. He was emotionless and businesslike whether it was women or killings.

I said, "Hello, Mike," and nodded to Danny and walked over and sat beside Stella.

There was silence in the room. Mike kept rolling a pair of dice across his desk, and every time they turned up seven—six and one. Finally, the stick man from the crap table came in.

"Did Steve leave the layout?" Mike asked.

The stick man shook his head.

"See the switch?"

"No."

"Okay." Mike looked at me. "Mind taking a frisk?" he asked.

"Mind telling me what this is all about?" I asked.

"After," Mike said.

I stood up and Danny started around the desk toward me.

"You better get help, Mike," I said. "I think I can take this son of a bitch, and if he lays a hand on me, I'm going to try."

It didn't stop Danny, and I watched him come toward me, still deadpan. He walked slowly in an easy loose-jointed way—effortless, disinterested, going to a job that he knew he did well. I waited until he was within two steps of me and saw the small meaningful tightening of the muscle of his arm under the black of his dinner jacket. And then I took a quick step sideways and toward him and swung a hard right into his stomach that drove the breath out of him with a surprised 'whoosh.' The next was a left to the jaw and then the right to the temple,

and he was down—motionless on the floor and the thin mouth was slack.

But not for more than the first minute; then he was after his rod. A quick snakelike gesture to the shoulder holster, and then I was looking into the bad end of an automatic.

I can sweat, and I did. It wasn't hard. Danny got to his feet slowly and pushed the gun into my belly, hard. His free hand was ready, an eager fist. He drew it back to throw it—slowly, because he liked the feeling and wanted it to last.

CHAPTER X

THEN MIKE STOPPED HIM.

"Hold it, Danny," he said. "Mean so much to you, Steve?"

"I just want to know what the pitch is," I said. "It's getting so everybody in Coastview works out on me."

"I heard about Ricco," Mike said. "Miss Regan ran up quite a score with these dice." He rolled them across his desk. "She says she didn't bring them into the game."

"Did she say I did?" I asked.

"I said I didn't know a damn thing about them," Stella put in.

"You were next to her, Steve," Mike said.

"I didn't have any run," I pointed out.

"You bet with her."

"When she got hot," I explained. "I made maybe eighty bucks on her streak."

"If you made the switch," Mike said, "you haven't had a chance to get rid of my dice. Carrying any?"

"Take a look," I said. Danny holstered the gun and

gave me a quick, thorough frisk, looked at Mike and shook his head. Mike nodded. He pushed a button on the desk, and we waited in silence until two of his goons came in.

"Miss Regan is leaving," Mike told them. "See that she doesn't come here again—ever."

"You cheap punk," Stella said. "I've dropped more here than I made tonight. Ricco will cut you down to size."

"Good night, Miss Regan."

"You and that cheap whore of Best's," Stella said.

"Get out," Mike said. "Get out before I throw you out on your can." His voice was low, calm, and deadly, but it didn't faze Stella. She got up slowly and walked to the door, there she turned.

"If you meet Brant coming into Clara's when you're going out," she said, "give him my love!"

She swished through the door and the two goons followed her. Mike sat watching until the door closed. He looked thoughtful.

"Snowhound," Danny said.

"Maybe," Mike said.

"You don't think Brant . . ."

"Shut up," Mike told him. "Steve, you blow."

"Sure," I said. I walked to the door and opened it.

"And, Steve," he stopped me, "forget this."

"Yeah." I walked out into the hallway and back to the big gambling room. I killed an hour and a half playing dollar black jack, and then went out to my car in the parking lot. When I got in, I noticed the note stuck on the wheel. It was scrawled on the back of an envelope in bright lipstick.

'612 Seaside Way, Apt. 14. I'm waiting. S.R.'

The address side of the envelope had Miss Stella Regan, and the Seaside number repeated, in typewritten script. I drove out of the lot and turned toward Seaside Way, a wide, oceanfront street. 612 was a four story stone and glass apartment building very modern and very fancy.

I drove past and parked a block away and walked back. The double door was unlocked, and the lobby, a small square with a desk alcove and two elevator doors, was empty. A small sign told me that Apartment 14 was on the top floor. I slid the elevator open and got in. It rose silently to the fourth floor, and stopped, and I opened the door and got out. The door marked 14 was furthest along the hall on the left. I tapped on it softly.

Stella opened the door. She was wearing lounging pajamas, black top and white pants, and white fuzzy slippers. Her hair was tied up on top of her head.

She said, "Where the hell have you been?" and led me, without waiting for an answer, through the small entry hall into a large living room. It was all done in greens and off-white, and the floor was covered with a dark brown shaggy rug. The front of the room was all windows overlooking the ocean.

"Where's Ricco?" I asked.

"Out of town."

"Gus?"

"He don't sleep here. I tied a can on him. Sit down. You want a drink?"

"No."

"Well, I do. Scotch and SevenUp, here's my glass."

I took it to the bar and made a stiff drink, took it to her, and then sat on the sofa opposite.

"Well?" I asked.

"You think you're goddammed clever, don't you?"

"Why?"

"Switching them dice."

"I thought you did it," I said.

"Balls."

I shrugged. "Why would I? I didn't even get healthy from it. You really didn't do it?"

"You think I'm stupid. Throw sevens into that game? That stickman was a dope to let them go as long as he did."

"Are you sure the dice didn't feel like queers?" I asked.

"They felt like dice, that's all."

"Then he did it," I said.

"Who did what?"

"The stickman. I know goddammed well I didn't pull a switch, and you say you didn't."

"I know I didn't," she said.

"That's it then," I said. "He probably didn't even have to make a switch—when you were making a run he just changed the dice, signaled the stooge, and then Mike had you brought to his office. Mike probably had the queers all the time. How the hell do we know those queers weren't a pair he keeps in his desk just for this purpose."

"The son of a bitch."

"And he had me hauled in to make it look like he was being fair," I said.

"Why would Mike do it?"

"Mike doesn't do anything just for the hell of it," I said. "Maybe you've shot off your mouth about Clara Best before."

"That pig!"

"And maybe you made that crack about Brant and her before, and Mike heard it."

"So he puts me in a frame with crooked dice?"

"It keeps you out of his joint, and it'll get around," I said. "Ricco can't do a damn thing about it, either. What did you expect Mike to do, slug you?"

"Ricco will do plenty," she said. "He'll be able to buy and sell Mike pretty soon."

"Sure," I agreed. "Anything in that Brant business?"

"You're nosey, ain't you. Fix me a drink."

I took her glass to the bar and worked on it. "Just curious," I said, without turning around. "I never heard it before."

"I saw them together," she said. "And with her, just

seeing them together is enough."

"Oh." I took the drink to her. "There are a lot of reasons why they'd be together."

"Not the way I saw them, and not where I saw them. So shut up about it."

"Sure. So Ricco's going to expand."

"Don't worry none about Ricco," she said.

"I don't."

"And stop trying to snoop."

"You asked me up here," I said.

"I didn't ask you to load my drinks, did I?"

"I didn't."

"All right, then, don't." She sipped the drink, looked at me, sipped it again, and then drained it in three swallows. She put the glass carefully on the coffee table and straightened up. She looked at me—suddenly her eyes seemed very clear, very large—"Steve," she said, "just what the hell are you up to?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You're a lying bastard." She blinked, looked down at the glass and then back at me, this time her eyelids half closed her eyes.

"Let's go to bed," she said.

"All right," I said.

CHAPTER XI

IT WAS STILL DARK when I woke and my watch read five-thirty. I got up and dressed, and managed to leave the apartment without waking Stella. The elevator was still silent and the lobby was empty when I went out. The air was damp with a light fog and the ticket, stuck under the wiper of my car's windshield, was limp from the mois-

ture. It was for over-parking, left there at one-thirty. It didn't bother me because the car was registered in my lawyer's name.

When I got home it was just getting light. I made and drank some coffee, then showered and shaved and got dressed, except for a tie. It was eight-thirty when the phone rang.

"You all right?" Squint asked.

"Fine," I said.

"Got something for you. Want to wait there or at your office?"

"Here," I said.

He arrived in half an hour, his eyes bloodshot and his hands shaking from a hangover. He sprawled in a chair.

"Rough night," he told me. "Nothing happened to you?"

"No. What's this thing you've got?"

"Rumors. After I blew the Palace, I went to Pete's and killed the night. About an hour after I got there, I picked up the rumor that Moran had tossed Ricco's gal out on her can."

"He did," I said.

"Figured," Squint said, "but the reason for it was that Moran didn't want Stella spending that kind of dough if Ricco couldn't pay his dues."

"He's thoughtful," I said.

"No. The story is that he don't like Ricco's getting away with it, he don't like Tony Moss and Pete Brant backing Ricco up on it."

"How much of it do you believe?"

"Well," Squint said, "I know why Moran tossed Stella out, if your plan worked."

"It did," I said.

"So I believe he tossed her out—the rest could be wind or it could have a lot of truth in it. I mean, not as a reason for tossing her out . . ."

"I know what you mean. Well, we'll get to work."

"Wait, there's more. About three o'clock, I was in Pete's back room, I picked up another rumor. This one was about Moran too. The story is that he got a load of Irish dew aboard and went calling on the Bests. One version is that he had words with Clara and slapped her around considerable, another is that he took it out on Frank, and the third is that he beat the hell out of both of them."

"When?"

"It was supposed to have happened about a half hour before I heard it."

"It might have," I said, and I told him what had been said and done in Moran's office. "I put on the tough act," I said, "so that Moran would have that to think about instead of the fact that I might have ditched the dice myself. And then Stella made that crack about Brant and Clara."

"Clara's no . . ."

"The only way she'd be able to get Moran at all would be on his terms," I said. "The Irishman wouldn't play if he had to share."

"Yeah," Squint agreed. "Best wouldn't count at all, but if Moran thought she was shacking up with Brant he'd really blow his cork. Worked out better than you planned, didn't it?"

"If it's true. I wonder how Elwell will take it?"

"With a yawn. He don't think much of Clara. Sue, the one that's in school back East, is his doll. And she'll be home in a couple of days, I hear."

"Another Clara?"

"Who knows? She's only nineteen, and she's been away at school for two, three years. Elwell figures she's too good for his Coastview friends."

"We better get to work."

"Yeah. Here's that magazine and schedule Alp left in my office."

I put the magazine on the table and glanced through

the list of typewritten names on the paper Squint handed me. They didn't mean anything.

"I guess these are the calls Doctor Grange made Monday and Tuesday. You want to give them a quick check? I don't think you'll get anything—whatever he saw or heard he got Sunday before he wrote to his father, but he might just have dropped a hint about it along the way."

"I'll check," Squint said. "You got plans?"

"I'm going to . . ." The phone's ring interrupted me. I got up and answered it. It was Western Union.

"I have a telegram for Mr. Steven Cash."

"Speaking," I said.

"From Mr. Howard Grange, San Francisco. Meet me St. Francis Hotel lobby four thirty this afternoon. Urgent. Signed Grange."

I said thanks and hung up.

"Grange," I told Squint. "He wants me in San Francisco. I'll take the noon plane."

"Say what for?"

"Urgent. I'll have time to cash those checks of Grange's. You know Pop Levy's hock shop on Main Street?" Squint nodded. "I'll leave the dough with him. If you need any you can get it there. I ought to be back tonight. You check that list and then see what you can pick up on Moran's binge last night. I'll see you here at midnight. Right?"

"I'll have to be drunk to be up that late, Steve. Last night was rough."

"All right. See me here tomorrow morning, eight-thirty. Let's blow."

Squint left and I put on a tie, gathered an overcoat and the magazine and went out to my car. I cashed the checks at my bank, left all but three hundred dollars of it at the hock shop with instructions for Pop to give Squint as much as he asked for, as long as it lasted. I didn't have to tell Pop to keep quiet about it. Then I dropped the parking ticket off at my lawyer's office, made a reservation at the Airline ticket agency, caught a quick meal of pan-

cakes and bacon, and was at the airport at a quarter of twelve. The plane took off at twelve-o-two, and I was at International Airport in San Francisco at two o'clock. On the trip, I leafed through the Factual Detective Magazine and read a couple of the stories. There was one page missing near the center of the book, and when I got into downtown San Francisco I bought another copy of the magazine. The missing page was the beginning of a story about Nick Moss, wanted for murder by two states, kidnapping and murder and robbery of a Federal Reserve Bank, and several other breaches of the law. The missing page was the one with his front and profile pictures reproduced.

I went to the St. Francis, found a seat in the lobby and waited for Grange. It was twenty-five past four when he came in. With him was a young, broad-shouldered, sharp-eyed, pointed-nosed guy. Grange spotted me and steered the young guy over. I stood up.

"Mr. Cash," Grange introduced me, "Mr. Hellier."

I shook the guy's hand, and took a dislike to him. He put a lot of squeeze into his grip and he smiled showing a lot of teeth, but the smile didn't change the fact that this eyes were busy memorizing me.

"Mr. Hellier is—ah—interested in our business, Mr. Cash," Grange said.

"A detective?" I asked.

"Yes," Hellier said. "I think we'd better go to my office to talk."

"Did you hire Mr. Hellier?" I asked.

"I sort of invited myself into it," Hellier answered.

"You see . . ." Grange started.

"I don't think we need another detective, Mr. Grange," I said. "And certainly not a San Francisco man. I've got someone working with me in Los Angeles. He knows the problem and he knows the places involved. I don't want to spend money on help until we really need more, and then I'll insist on picking my own. I don't doubt that

Mr. Hellier is a good detective, but I don't think he'll be a bit of use to us."

Hellier kept his toothy smile.

"Mr. Cash," Grange said, "if you'll listen.' . . ."

"I don't want to be bothered with him," I said. "Look, if . . ."

"No, you look, Cash. You don't have any choice in this matter. And if you'll keep still long enough, I'll explain. Mr. Hellier is with the FBI."

CHAPTER XII

I SMILED WEAKLY and agreed to go to Hellier's office to talk. We took a cab. Hellier did all the talking, about how he would have felt the same about me if the circumstances had been reversed.

He was still doing the talking when we got to his office. He shut up long enough for Grange and me to get settled in chairs in front of his desk and then started again.

It was a long story, and I didn't interrupt, and what it boiled down to was that the FBI harbored a theory that a dope ring was being headed from Coastview and that it was knowledge about it that Doctor Grange and Alp had uncovered that motivated their murders. Hellier gave the impression that the FBI could move in any time and knock off most of the ring, but that they wanted the top man and didn't as yet have any idea who it was. I got a word in, suggesting that if it was headed by someone in Coastview it would have to be Elwell because he was the boss there. Hellier explained that he didn't have anything concrete against Elwell or anyone else in Coastview for that matter. He didn't bother to explain why they thought the ring was run from Coastview beyond

mentioning that the town was suspiciously clean of dope. I mentioned the fact that the boss down there would want it that way because he wouldn't want to give the Feds any excuse to come in and break up his party, but Hellier shrugged that off. He told us that a dope ring needed big money and an enforcer—a thug with a gang on tap—to operate and Cosatview could supply both of those items.

“And,” he said, “I’m convinced that Doctor Grange saw or heard something that would have uncovered the dope setup, and he was killed because of it. There’s no other reason for his murder; he knew the gambling setup, everyone does, he knew you could buy an abortion from a Coastview doctor, he knew the Hospital setup there is simply a country club for drunks and psychos. What else but the dope setup could have alarmed him so?”

I couldn't answer that question, and I couldn't answer it the second time he asked it using Alp as the subject. I had to admit that I didn't know why either of them were killed. That admission gave Hellier a chance to compare my abilities with Alp's, and he took it. He pointed out that Alp must have been real alert because he found out something so important that they had to kill him, and he'd done it in one day.

I mentioned the fact that I was at least still alive, but neither Grange nor Hellier were much impressed by the fact.

That wound it up. I told him I was sorry I wasn't of any help and he said he was sorry too, and gave me the tight hand squeeze and the toothy grin. I went out in the hall and waited until Grange joined me. Grange didn't do any talking, not while we rode down in the elevator or while we waited for a cab. We were almost back to the St. Francis before he asked:

“You didn't hold out on Hellier, did you?”

It sounded like he wished I had.

“No,” I said.

Finally, just as we drew up to the hotel entrance, I asked him:

"You want me to stay on the job?"

"Yes." And it was comforting that he didn't think it over before he answered.

We had dinner together and then I got the ten p.m. plane back to L.A. It was about one a.m. when I rolled into bed.

I woke at seven, dressed and cooked bacon and eggs and ate and read the paper while I waited for Squint to call.

It was a quarter to nine when I called his house.

A woman's voice said, "He isn't home, hasn't been all night. Who is this?"

"I'll be right over," I said and hung up.

The house was small, green stucco, set behind a neat little lawn, in a neighborhood of houses of the same size and shape and atmosphere. I went up onto the porch and pushed the bell button.

The woman was short and plump with brown hair and brown eyes, and a very calm and pleasant manner. She was maybe thirty-five or forty, and wore a cotton house dress, blue and white and crisp looking, and a darker blue apron with a white frill around it. Her voice was the voice from the phone, slightly nasal, but not unpleasant.

"How do you do," she said and waited.

"I'm Steve Cash," I told her. "I called you earlier."

"Oh, yes. Well, Mr. Lewis hasn't come home yet."

"You're Mrs. Lewis?" I asked.

"Yes. Was it some business you had with Mr. Lewis?"

"Yes, business," I said. "May I come in?"

"Oh, goodness, of course. Pardon me, I didn't mean to keep you standing out here. I thought as he wasn't home. . . . Come in."

"Has Mr. Lewis been in touch with you?" I asked.

"Not since he called yesterday afternoon."

"He called yesterday?"

"About three o'clock. He told me—well, first he asked me what we were having for dinner and I told him pot roast, that's a favorite of his the way I fix it, you know, with sort of a sour gravy, and he said he had finished in town and he'd be home early and he wanted to get to bed early too. Said he was tired."

"And he didn't come home for dinner?"

"No."

"You don't seem worried."

"Oh, goodness, I'm not worried. If I worried every time he didn't come home for dinner when he said he would, I'd be worn out from worry."

"Well," I stood up and walked to the door. "If he comes in will you have him call me? Just tell him to call Steve Cash, he'll know where."

"I'll tell him," she said. "If you want to, you could go to the office and talk to Mr. Dobson, his partner. Mr. Dobson could probably help you if it's business. They're partners, you know."

"I might try there," I said.

I drove slowly down town to my office, thinking.

I had to find Squint and I couldn't dismiss his absence as easily as the placid Mrs. Lewis. I had to find him because he was my obligation; in this caper he was my partner and as such I was responsible for him. Just as he would be responsible for me.

I had to find him because, like a damned fool, I'd let him know too much without ever thinking that he'd get picked up by them and squeezed. I didn't know for sure how much he'd take without talking. A lot, I hoped.

I drove past my office building and on down to Coast-view and it was ten-fifteen when I parked in front of Tom Elwell's big house.

It was Colonial style, white pillars and a short curved driveway and a green lawn growing in imported soil. Beyond it was the white, clean, hand-swept, fenced-off beach. There was a Cad convertible, blue with cream leather upholstery, in the driveway. I walked past it, up

to the big white door and banged the brass eagle knocker. A white-haired, dignified colored man opened the door.

"Mr. Elwell," I said. "It's important."

"Your name, please?"

"Cash, Steven Cash. Tell him it's important."

"Yes, sir."

The door closed and I waited. It had been a long road for Tom Elwell, stretching from his slum beginnings in Chicago to this mansion with a colored butler. And the story was a long one too, and probably a dirty one. It included rum-running, a self-defense murder or two, purchase of Coastview when it was nothing but fishermen's shacks and was called Bloody Point, bribery of certain major officials that brought a highway to its nothingness, a crooked real estate promotion, and finally the fine homes and rich owners pushed out to its expanse by the growing metropolis behind it.

And through it all, Tom Elwell at the controls, getting rich and gathering respectability, until, to preserve the new respect, he'd carved the town into pieces and handed them to the big four.

Some of the wise boys laughed at Tom for not holding on to the gambling, for giving the actual operation of it to the big four—not realizing that by holding it he'd have been just a gambler, no matter how rich. But this way he was a power. And not just in Coastview. Coastview couldn't have operated the way it did without help from the big boys higher up the ladder.

It was a long story.

The butler came back and led me into the wide entry hall with its gracious curved stairway. I noticed it, and I noticed the girl coming down the stairs. She was wearing tennis shorts and a white sweater, and her legs were the honey-brown of newly-baked bread and her hair matched it. She was a trim, youthful figure, conditioned, with small tight breasts and wide shoulders. Her face reminded me some of the Mick in Best's office—not as im-

pertinent, not as saucy, not as pug-nosed. You could feel that the tennis shorts weren't just for effect, she'd play fast, hard tennis, and she'd control a horse with a tight rein, and swim with a graceful, clean crawl stroke, and drive a long ball and putt carefully and confidently. Sue Elwell, pride of Tom's heart, and now, probably, a source of his worries, built as she was, and with curious green eyes.

She said, "Hi."

I said, "Hello." She didn't seem to know me, didn't seem to remember the few times I'd seen her before she'd gone away to school.

The butler said, "This way, Mr. Cash."

And I followed him down the hall toward the beach front of the big house and into a glass-walled breakfast room.

Tom Elwell, big, going to fat, white-haired, senatorial looking, with a tight mouth and hard, gray-green eyes, sat at a maple table, coffee and cigar and paper occupying him, and I waited until he sipped, drew, and looked up at me.

"Cash," he said, testing the name. "Cash—name's familiar. Sit down." I sat. "Hectic morning, my daughter arrived. Where've I heard your name?"

"Probably from Marvin Hope when he got your okay on clearing Doctor Robert Grange," I said.

He sipped, puffed, and studied me. "Coffee?"

"Thanks," I said. He poured it and handed me the cup. I put in cream and sugar.

"You said it was important," he reminded me.

"I've got some information for you that I think is important," I said. "And as long as you did me a favor by okaying that Grange deal, I figure I owe you one."

"Frank Best asked my advice on that matter," he said. "In the interest of fairness, I felt the Doctor's name should be cleared."

"You know that there was positive evidence showing

that Doctor Grange couldn't have been guilty as charged?"

Elwell looked at me sharply. "Frank didn't go into it," he said. "What is this information you have that you feel is important to me?"

"Well," I said, "the FBI is about to lower the boom on you for a narcotics charge."

His mouth fell open and he widened his eyes. Finally he licked his lips and said: "Good God."

It sounded sort of like a prayer the way he said it.

CHAPTER XIII

HE RECOVERED QUICKLY; although his hand trembled a little when he lifted the cigar to his mouth, his eyes were cold again.

"Well," he said, "if your intent was to shock me, Mr. Cash, you achieved your purpose."

"That wasn't my purpose," I said.

"Whatever your purpose," he said, "I have to admire your courage in coming here with a rumor you picked up—or is the story made of whole cloth? Just what is your game, Mr. Cash?"

I stood up. "I came here to repay a favor you did me," I said.

"I did you no favors."

"I thought you did. What I told you, I got from an FBI agent yesterday. His name is Hellier and I met him in San Francisco; that ought to be easy to check if you're interested. Anyway, now we're square. You did something for me and I've done something for you, and whatever you do with the information I gave you is your own goddammed business."

I turned and walked to the doorway.

"Come back here and sit down."

I didn't turn around or stop walking; "Go to hell," I told him. I went out and down the hallway and was at the front door, one hand on the knob when he caught up to me.

"Wait," he said. I turned and looked at him. "I . . . I'm sorry." It was a hard and unusual effort for him to say it. "Please come back."

I shrugged and walked back to the breakfast room. He followed me. I sat down and took a sip of my coffee. He went around to his chair, sat down, pushed the ashtray, cup and saucer to one side of the table, and leaned toward me. "I'm not and have never been in any way connected with any narcotics business," he said.

"It isn't any use telling me," I said, "I'm not the FBI. I simply came here to do you a favor in repay . . ."

"I know, I know—and I appreciate it very much. I'd like to get some details. The whole story."

"Well," I said, "I guess it starts with Doctor Grange and his murder."

"Murder? I thought . . . Wait a minute. Harris, Harris," he shouted. The colored butler came in from the kitchen. "Get Frank Best, tell him I want him over here right away." The butler started out. "Wait—and Moran, try the Palace and if he's not there, call his apartment. Now, Cash—ah—is it Steve?" I nodded. "Good. Now Steve, let's have it."

"How soon will Best be here?" I asked.

"He goddammed better be here in ten minutes."

"I won't have time to tell it all," I said. "I don't want to meet him."

"Why the hell not?"

"You don't seem to realize that I'm sticking my neck out telling you this. I'm ratting on the FBI, and I don't think they'll like it much. And Best has got a big mouth."

"You can be sure it won't go out of this room, Steve."

"I don't know," I said. "Best doesn't owe me anything:

neither does Moran, as far as that goes. If you really don't know anything about the Doctor's murder or Alp's . . ."

"Alp's?"

"Rosco Alp, he's part of it too. Like I said, if you don't know anything about them, and Best does or Moran does, or if either of them was responsible for them . . ." I shrugged. "It doesn't put me in a very healthy spot."

"I'll tell you this, Steve," he emphasized it by pounding his fist on the table, "no matter who is responsible, nothing's going to happen to you."

"Even if it's just a pipe dream?" I asked. "Not mine, but the FBI's?"

"Even then," he said. "I can't figure any other motive for your coming here than the one you told me—that you think I did you a favor. That's enough, I appreciate it and I think it's a friendly act; and I take care of my friends. And Best and Moran will do what I tell them. And so will anybody else in this town."

"Then maybe we'd better wait so I'll only have to tell it once," I suggested.

He agreed, called Harris and had hot coffee brought.

In less than ten minutes, Best and Moran and Hope arrived.

Elwell looked around the table. "I want you to listen to what Steve has to say," he said. "Go ahead, Steve."

"Well," I said, "it probably starts with Doctor Grange's murder . . ."

"What the hell. . ." It was Hope.

"Shut up," Elwell told him. "Just listen, we'll hear from the rest of you later. Go on."

"Grange hired a San Francisco private operator named Rosco Alp to find out who killed his son; not the actual murderer, Grange figured Walker Emmet was that, but the guy who ordered it done. Alp got murdered too."

I looked around. Best looked confused, Hope looked ready to bust unless he could talk, and Moran was disinterested—watching me with a half smile.

"Then," I said, "Grange hired me. I convinced him

that the Doctor hadn't been murdered and that Alp was rubbed out for some reason not connected with the job he was doing for Grange—at least I thought I'd convinced him. I told him I'd try to get his son's name cleared, we had evidence that the arrest was a mistake. I talked to the Chief and Hope, and they said they'd think it over and let me know. Hope didn't bother to let me know, but a statement did appear in the papers. I figured I owed the favor to you." I nodded toward Elwell.

"I did advise Best to release the statement," Elwell said.

"And I didn't call you because I figured you'd see it in the papers. We thought the sooner the better, and there was time to get it into the afternoon finals." Hope said his piece quickly so Elwell couldn't shut him up.

"I didn't mind," I said. "I thought my job was done, and Grange was satisfied. But yesterday I got a wire from him telling me to meet him in San Francisco. I did, and he was with this Mr. Hellier, the FBI Agent."

Moran looked up at me and the smile flickered and died and then came back. Best dropped his mouth open, and Hope leaned back into his chair and let his breath out in a long sigh.

"The FBI was interested in Doctor Grange's death," I went on. "Hellier said he knew Grange was murdered. . ."

"How?" It was Elwell.

"He didn't say, and he didn't tell me how they knew any of the other things he told me. He said they knew Alp was murdered in Coastview, too. And he told me about a dope ring they've traced to Coastview. They have it all tagged but they don't have the brain spotted absolutely." I stopped and waited, hoping the thinness of the lie wouldn't show through, hoping the fear of the FBI would hide it. It didn't.

"He did a lot of talking for an FBI man," Moran said. He was still smiling.

"Not about much that I didn't know," I said. "And I wasn't supposed to talk about what he did tell me. He

wanted information from me, and he had to give me some to get it."

"What information?" Elwell asked.

"What I knew about Doctor Grange's murder."

Moran stood up. He was still smiling while he looked at me, but his mouth was straight when he turned to Elwell; he didn't even look at Best and Hope.

"If," he said, "you ain't got anything better to do than sit here while Steve deals from the bottom of the deck, you keep taking a hand. Me, I'm busy—too busy to listen to a lot of pipe dreams he's spinning for some game of his own. You play, but count me out; this is a bunch of god-damned hogwash."

He walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV

ELWELL WAS UP AND OUT after Moran before the rest of us could move. We heard him call to Moran and then the silence while he caught up to the big Irishman.

"You don't walk out on me, Mike." Elwell's voice was loud and angry.

"I walk out when I want to. You be stupid if you please." Moran's brogue was gone.

"And you don't talk to me that way, either. Get back there till I'm finished with you."

"I don't like the company, any of it."

"You were a snot-nosed Mick errand boy before I put you where you are today, and I can put you back where you were."

"Don't threaten me, Tom."

"Threaten. I'm telling you. Did you think I'd sit still when you raised your filthy hand against Clara? Did you

think I wouldn't know when you caused a drunken brawl in her house?"

Moran's laugh was mirthless and bitter. "That's right, Tom, protect her. She's such a credit to you, prowling around like a bitch in heat. . ."

There was the sound of a scuffle, but neither Hope nor Best moved. I got up, thought better of it and then sat down. The fighting sounds were short, and then Elwell's voice, low and angry:

"Get out and get out of Coastview."

"Don't try it," Moran said, and then we heard the door slam and the slow heavy sound of Elwell coming back to the breakfast room. He stood for a few seconds framed in the entry way, a look of contempt on his face. Best mopped his face with a handkerchief and Hope nervously lit a cigarette. I sat and waited.

Elwell came around the table to his chair and sat down.

"I want the Palace closed tonight," he said.

"But Tom . . ." Best started.

"Shut up. It's your battle I'm fighting. Where were you last night? Under the bed? You do what I say and just what I say; understand?"

"All right, Tom."

There was a long silence while Elwell brooded to calmness, while the deep flush slowly left his face and the bright red blotch of a slap mark became visible on his cheek, while the trembling of his hands stilled and his breath slowed to an almost even pace.

He turned to me: "I said what happened here wouldn't leave this room, I mean it both ways."

"You can speak for Moran?" I asked.

I thought I'd gone too far. Elwell's eyes narrowed and he studied me for several seconds. "I'll handle Moran," he said. "I think you'd better . . ."

"Before I go through a third degree about this," I said, "I'd like to explain a few things. The FBI knows you run Coastview, and if there's a drug ring headquarters here it

must be your baby. Wait. Hellier had the reports I'd written to Grange, but he wanted more details," I lied. "For one thing, he wanted to know why Best hadn't asked me for the evidence I had that proved the Doctor's innocence."

Elwell thoughtfully studied the end of his cigar. Finally he turned to Best: "What about it, Frank?" he asked.

"Well," Best said, "we already had the evidence—we knew the Doc had been out of town when he was supposed to have performed the operation."

"How?" I asked.

Elwell looked at me but let the question stand.

"Alp told us," Frank said. "Alp came to us and told us about the Doctor being out of town. We said we'd look into the matter. That was the day before Alp was found dead in county territory."

"The fourteenth," Hope put in, "Wednesday. It wasn't anything to get excited about, Tom. When Doctor Bayler called us about the girl's story we had to pick Grange up and book him. We thought it would be better to pick him up at the Hospital, less fuss and all, and we made the arrangements with Bayler to call Grange to come there. It was just routine. It wasn't until after we'd made the arrangements that Emmet remembered Grange's nurse, and so we figured we'd get her at her apartment. We missed her."

"That's just the way it was, Tom," Best said. "I wasn't even there when Grange was brought in."

"Were you?" I asked Hope.

He looked at Elwell, got a nod and then said: "No, I left a few minutes after Frank did."

"Well," Elwell said, "I think the FBI is way off base on this; maybe they're fishing. Why would Grange be murdered, and why this Alp person? I'm thinking more and more that Moran was right—it's hogwash." He looked at me and I shrugged. "I didn't say it was your hogwash, Cash."

"All right," I agreed. "Maybe they fed me a line. I don't know why they'd do it, but maybe they did. So say *they* just *think* that the dope ring brain, and Grange's murder and Alp's killing are all tied up in Coastview; Mr. Grange *believes* them. He believes them so much that he hired himself another detective. He wouldn't use me again because I didn't think his son was murdered, or that Alp's death had anything to do with the case. This operator he hired is Squint Lewis, and I was supposed to see him this morning and turn over some papers and stuff Grange had given me. Thing is that Squint called his wife yesterday and said he was coming here to Coastview and would be home early. He didn't show at home. That makes two detectives, interested in what happened to Doctor Grange, who suddenly aren't anymore. It'll give the FBI a little more to think about, if nothing else."

"I see your point," Elwell said. He turned to Best. "Well, Frank?"

"I ain't seen Lewis—he hasn't been to my office."

"And," I turned and faced Elwell, "there are a couple of more things I'd like to say; mainly because of the dandy reception I've had around here. Every time the wind changes I get a fishy stare from you. First, if you try to close the Palace you're going to have a king-sized gang war in your town. Maybe you can handle it, but it's bound to bring the outside law closer. And second, if you want to feel safe about how much the FBI can prove about what happened to Doctor Grange, you'd better be sure that Grange's personal possessions form reads that he was allowed to keep his belt in his cell."

Elwell got up and walked to the hall entryway. "All of you," he said, "stay right here for a few minutes."

He went out.

It was closer to fifteen minutes before he came back. And while we waited, none of us talked. Best and Hope smoked, neither seemed too nervous nor too relaxed.

"Now, Frank," he said, "I want you to listen very carefully. First, forget about closing the Palace. Second, I

want this town put through a fine tooth comb—I want Lewis found if he's here, or I want to be sure he isn't. Third, I want you to find out what happened to Rosco Alp after he left your office. Got all that?"

"Sure."

"That's not all. I've just finished talking to your day desk-sergeant. There were bruises on Doctor Grange's body, but there was no trouble when his fingerprints were taken. He didn't have his belt in the cell with him. So I think the point is obvious—Grange was murdered."

"But . . ." Frank looked to Hope for a signal but didn't get it. He closed his mouth.

"Murdered;" Elwell repeated. "I want Walker Emmitt picked up and booked on suspicion. I want a complete investigation. I want the whole thing given to the papers. If it's handled right it might not mean your neck; I think it probably will, but it might not. One thing is certain, it isn't going to be my neck."

CHAPTER XV

THE CHIEF AND HIS CENSOR LEFT. Best looked like a man whose dollar Corona had exploded in his face. Hope was as quiet as a new refrigerator and just as white. Elwell and I were silent for a few moments after the sound of the front door closing.

"You're still working for Grange," he said. It wasn't a question. I nodded. "How much else was, ah, inaccurate?"

"Nothing important," I said. "I didn't figure I had a chance in Coastview if I admitted I was trying to prove Grange's murder, so I gave that line to Best and Hope about just wanting to clear the doctor's name. But Squint was working for me and when he turned up missing I

knew I had to get action before he ended up like Alp. So I came to you."

"You did talk to the FBI man?"

"Yes."

"I'll ask it again. Have you got what you wanted?"

"Not quite," I said.

"No, I thought not. Well, Walker Emmitt will wind it up for you. Excuse me, I have to call the paper."

He left me. I lit a weed and considered the possibility of Emmitt's story getting the whitewash treatment and I made up my mind to try and have Elwell arrange for me to be in on the first questioning. I heard the front door slam and the sound of footsteps running down the hallway. I looked up. It was Sue Elwell.

She smiled. "Hi. Where's Dad?"

I stood up. "He's phoning. He'll be back in a minute."

"Oh." She walked around the table and sat in Elwell's chair. I sat down and she studied me with those curious green eyes.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"Steve Cash," I told her. "You wouldn't remember."

"Wait. I was fifteen and you were here. It was about the man who got poisoned on his yacht. You're a detective. See, I have a fabulous memory."

"Sure," I agreed.

Elwell came into the room. "Home already, Sue?"

"I lost my car keys at the Club," she said. "Ed dropped me off so I could get the other set. I'll walk back and pick up the car."

"You haven't seen Clara?"

"I called from the Club and I was going up to her place from here."

"You'd better go then," he said.

She got up and walked to the doorway. "Goodbye, Steve," she said.

Elwell remained standing.

"I want to talk to you again, Steve," he said. "Call me tomorrow about eleven, I'll be at the paper."

I opened my mouth to put in a pitch about being around for Emmet's questioning, but the impatient expression on his face stopped me. I'd pushed my luck far enough. I got up.

"Fine," I said. "About eleven."

He said yes, but he hadn't been listening. I walked down the hall to the front door and out. I stood there for almost a minute trying to decide where to go and what to do. Sue came out.

"That your car?" I nodded. "Would you be going near the Beach Club?"

"I could," I said.

"Swell, it'll save me a walk."

I held the door for her and she got in. She was still wearing the tennis shorts and the white sweater, but she'd thrown a tan camel's hair polo coat over her shoulders.

I got in and started the motor.

"Are you detecting?" she asked.

I looked at her. "Detecting?"

"For Dad."

"Oh, no," I told her, "just business."

"Dull," she said.

I nodded. I offered her a cigarette and, when she took it, pushed in the dash lighter. When it clicked I lit hers and my own. Two police cars were standing, one against the curb and the other double parked beside it on the opposite side of the street, and I could hear the chatter of their radios as we passed. And then, in the distance, I could hear the whine of a siren. It grew louder and suddenly a dark green Ford coupe rushed past us going the way we'd come. I stepped on the brakes and swung to the curb. The screaming of the siren beat in my ears and another police car flashed by. As I scrambled out of my car, I heard the shriek of tires against pavement.

Behind us, a block and a half, the parked police cars had formed a barricade across the road. The shriek of tires had been from the Ford coupe and it was followed by another from the pursuing police car. I started running

toward the scene. The driver of the Ford coupe had been Walker Emmitt. I was the half block away when I heard the first shot, loud and clear and alone and followed by seconds of silence and I could hear the slap of my shoes against the street and the whistle of my breath and then the silence was filled with the roar of guns and I slowed to a walk because by then I knew it was over.

By the time I got to the coupe, Emmitt was dead, lying on the black asphalt of the street, his blood seeping into a pool around his head and the ugly little holes in his chest black against the white of his shirt.

A cop pushed me back from the body. The crowd was beginning to gather, but it wouldn't be a big crowd, not on that street, not from that neighborhood, this was the Gold Coast of Coastview and the rich were not so curious.

There were six cops from the three police cars, six cops and the still white Marvin Hope. I pushed past the cops to him.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The damned fool," Hope said, "the goddammed fool."

"What happened?" I asked again.

"He tried to fight it out, he threw the first shot. The damned fool."

I finally got it from him. They, Hope and two cops, had gone to bring Emmitt in. He was driving away from his house when they arrived and they'd given chase, alerting the other radio cars.

"How'd he know?" I asked.

"Know what?"

"You were coming to get him."

"Why would he know?"

"Why was he driving away?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't know that he did know."

"All right, go on."

"He ran into this barricade," Hope gestured at the cars. "We came up behind him and I hollered for him to get out of the car and keep his hands up."

"Not at first." It was the cop next to Hope.

"What at first?" I asked.

"I told Walker we wanted to talk to him. Then Walker says what we could do, you know?" I nodded. "So then Marv got out and hollered to Walker to get out and keep his hands up and Walker threw a shot at him. Damned near got him too."

"So then?"

"You a reporter?"

"No."

He looked at Hope and got a nod. "So then," he went on, "me and Gus blasted him."

"When did he get out of the car?"

"I don't know, after we threw a few; he tried to get out the other side and Mac and the boys there winged him. We got him good when he come around this side. I sure as hell don't know what he thought he was getting away with. Like Marv said, the goddammed fool."

"He was a cop," I said, and it got me a dirty look.

"I didn't even have a gun," Hope said. "I didn't think he'd shoot."

"Somebody knew he would," I said.

"What?"

"Did he pick this road?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't go any place," I said. "After it passes the hospital, it curves around and ends in a circle. You think it was a good road to run on?"

"He could have gone out Baydrive to the main highway," Hope said.

"So he picked this route. And it's a road that doesn't go any place. Except where Walker wanted to go, where he'd run if he was told to, if someone had phoned him and promised to take care of him until the heat was off."

"Who?" Hope asked.

"This road goes to Elwell's house," I said.

And when I turned around there was Sue Elwell standing behind me where she could hear everything that had been said.

CHAPTER XVI

THIS TIME IT WAS THE DEN at Elwell's, a paneled, book-cased, leather furnished room. And this time it was an angry Elwell, his rage, partly because of my accusations, mostly because I'd brought his Sue into it. And this time she was there, her green eyes still as frozen as they'd been when she'd demanded I take her home, demanded I confront her father with the things I'd said to Hope. Demanded and then was silent and the resentment against me almost a thing you could touch and feel.

There'd been a brief scene in the hallway while she told him about Walker's death and the things I'd said to Hope. And then he'd tried to send her away.

"It's a man's business," he'd said.

"It's my business. I've heard things, even back at school and before I went and when I was here vacations. I've a right to know the truth."

"Great God," he'd stormed, "do you believe I arranged this thing, and on his word alone?" He'd gestured at me.

"I've a right to know," she'd insisted and so she was there in the den while he stormed at me.

"You're trouble," he said, fighting for calmness, "trouble that I smelt from the first."

"Grange and Alp were murdered," I said. "That was the trouble, trying to hide it. And now Walker Emmet, put away before he could talk, before he could tell who gave the orders."

"You think I did it."

"You haven't denied it."

He started toward me, changed his mind, and walked behind the big desk and sat heavily in the swivel chair behind it.

"I'll spell it out," I said. "Walker knew he was going to be picked up; he was already running when the cops got there. After Best and Hope left here you made a phone call."

"To the paper," he said.

"So you say. Walker picked his route, a route that was crazy unless it led him to some promised haven. If he'd been told that it had to come out because it was too big to hide and if he was promised protection he'd grab at it. And when he saw the road barricaded by police he could pretty well figure it was a double cross and he'd try to fight his way out of it. Does it sound like a pipe dream; or hogwash? It was murder," I said. "Just like Grange and Alp. Crude, but effective, and who else in Coastview could have promised him cover?"

"All right," he said, "you spelled it out. Now I'll tell you. I didn't phone Walker; I didn't offer him anything; I didn't set up the trap. I don't know anything but this: you get out of this town and stay out." His fist pounded on the desk. "I'll give you a half an hour. Get out."

"Or wind up like Grange and Alp and Walker?" I asked.

Sue stood up and walked toward the door.

"Sue." Elwell's voice stopped her. She turned.

"I've heard enough," she said.

"You don't know what this is all about, Sue," he pleaded.

"I know that you've been accused of murder and all you've done is threaten him."

"I denied it, I do deny it. Don't you believe me?"

"I don't know," she said, and rushed from the room. Elwell stood up, started to follow her and then sank back into the chair, suddenly an old man.

"You goddammed son of a bitch," he said, but there was no sting to his voice. I walked to the door. "Wait," he said. "What are you going to do?"

I stood at the door and looked at him.

"Find out who ordered Grange's murder," I said. "And pin it on him."

He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "Sit down, Cash, I think it's time we talked business."

I sat down.

"Somebody is trying to take over my town," he said. This was the old Tom Elwell, the boss who spoke of his town like I'd speak of my car or my house. "I don't like it and if it weren't for Sue I'd handle it in my own way. You understand?" I nodded. "You want Grange's murderer, so do I." I opened my mouth, but he held up his hand to stop me. "Let me finish," he went on. "You can believe whatever you please about my connection with that affair or any of the things that have followed. I hope you won't waste time in trying to pin me in it. However, that's up to you. I want a clean sheet and I want it from you. I think that's the only way Sue will accept it. I'm willing to pay, more than that, I'll give you every bit of help I can; a free hand and my assurance that you'll be safe in Coastview."

"Unless you're in it, you can't give me that assurance," I said.

"I can't make it ironclad; no. But I can promise anyone who's interested that if you are taken out of the picture, I'll break this town into ten thousand pieces. That's a threat I don't make idly."

"I'll be dead but avenged," I said.

"You were going on even without that," he said. I nodded. "In addition to that protection, I'll pay you ten thousand dollars for information and the name of the person behind these murders."

"I doubt if I can get anything that a court . . ."

"If it convinces me, it will be enough."

"Grange gets it first," I said.

He held out his hand, but I'd had enough of him. I walked out without saying anything else.

On the way back to Los Angeles I kept trying to figure the old man's game. The way it looked, the way I hoped

it was, he was a father whose daughter might think he was a murderer. The only way she would believe differently was if I, or some outsider, cleared him by finding the guilty man. He could do it himself, he had the power and the goons and the control to take the town apart and sift the murderer out of the pieces; but there'd always be the implication that he'd bought a fall guy with the very means he used to find him.

That was one picture.

Another was that he was in it up to his ears and he didn't think I could get him even if he provided me with space in the City Hall. He'd let me poke around and he'd provide me with a lot of small, useless but encouraging clues, all leading away from him. And finally, when Grange got fed up and pulled me off, he'd be able to go to Sue and show that my sleuthing, which he'd picture as very high class stuff, failed to even come near him; i.e., he was clean as a peeled egg.

Or he might be using me as a piece of bait, carefully watched and attractively presented so that when I was taken out he'd have a line right to the fish. Nice thought.

I drove back to my office and read my mail, decided not to take the correspondence course in fingerprinting, locked up and went home. That was just as bad. I had a lot to think about and nothing to do, not then, not until Best turned up Squint or his body.

Or didn't. And then it would be up to me again.

I spent the afternoon pacing and smoking or sitting and smoking and the twilight came into the room and darkened the corners and finally I needed lights. And I was hungry.

There were eggs and bacon so I scrambled a half dozen and overcooked six slices and ate stale bread toasted and drank the leftover coffee and then took up the smoking again and it was almost ten when I finally got two cells in my brain working enough to give me an idea.

It wasn't the biggest idea in the world, and it was hinged on a premise that could be as off base as a runner

stealing second with the bags full and none out. It went this way.

If Elwell was telling the truth, a big if, then there was some other place along that road that Walker had picked to run on that would give him cover. And, discounting the fact that I didn't know just who the hell lived on that road; the other place might be the hospital. And to that start I could add the fact that Grange had been arrested at the hospital; that Daisy Eller had died at the hospital; that Alp had reported a lot of nasty opinions about Doctor Bayler, who was a resident physician at the hospital.

I was getting my coat so I could go down and snoop around the hospital when the phone rang.

"Steve Cash," I said.

"Hi, Steve, this is Jess Henly."

It took me a few seconds to place the name. He was a desk cop at the Lincoln Heights Jail, City of Los Angeles.

"Hi," I said.

"We got a drunk down here, Steve, and he asked me to call you."

"Who?"

"Squint Lewis. Want I should keep him until he's sober?"

"I'll be down after him," I said.

CHAPTER XVII

IT WAS SQUINT LEWIS, ALL RIGHT.

He was sprawled in a Captain's office, wearing a growth of beard and a rumpled suit that he had been sick on and he smelled of that and whiskey. He was able to say "Hi" weakly and from then on he sat and tried to keep his dull

glassy eyes open and he managed that but he couldn't focus them.

Jess Henly's story was simple. Squint had been found draped over the wheel of his car, passed out, a pint bottle of bourbon partly spilled on the seat beside him. The car had been found on a dead end street in Lincoln Heights, the lights on and the front fenders embracing a telephone pole.

Squint had managed to ask the cops to call me and that was all.

"We covered for him, Steve," Jess said. "The car's in the garage downstairs and he ain't booked."

I thanked him, called Ross Adams, my doctor, and arranged to have him meet me at my place. Then I got Squint out to my car and drove there. Squint didn't have a word to offer and I didn't press conversation. Ross helped me get him out of the car and into the apartment, out of the fouled suit and on to the bed. Then Ross took over.

I got the report in the living room.

"Drugged and he's coming out of it. I don't know what was used, but it was injected and I'd say some form of narcotic. He'll be all right. Is he an addict?"

"No."

He looked at me with a tight smile. "Nothing I should know?"

"Nothing I know," I said and he shrugged.

"All right, Steve, I gave him a mild stimulant. He'll be a bit talkative."

"Thanks."

"For what?"

I shrugged at that and he left. I called Squint's wife, told her I'd heard from him and that he was all right, busy but all right.

"He'll be home in the morning," I said.

"All right, that's fine."

Squint looked a little better, not brighteyed, yet, but some of the glassiness was gone.

"Well," I said. "What happened?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. How long has it been?"

"Since yesterday afternoon. I called your wife."

"She wouldn't worry."

"That's what she said. You feel like telling me about it?"

"Sure. It won't take long. First, I checked that list of names and got nothing. Grange had just made routine calls. I was through early so I figured I'd do a little snooping around Coastview. I called my wife and told her I'd be home for dinner and drove down there. I was thinking about what you'd said about how Grange saw or heard whatever he did before he wrote that letter to his father and I remembered you'd told me he'd called at the Coastview Hospital Sunday after he got back from Santa Barbara so I went out there to look around."

He waited for my question, but I didn't ask it.

"Anyway, I've got sort of an in there, a nurse, well that doesn't matter. At first she didn't give me much. She told me Doctor Grange had had some words with another nurse when he was there that Sunday, but that wasn't unusual. According to her, Grange knew just what the hospital was and he didn't like any part of it. So I didn't think too much of the story. I played a hunch and asked her if she remembered Alp being around the hospital. I described him and she remembered him. She said she'd seen him talking to the same nurse that Grange had had the tiff with. This other nurse is named Lee Hinds. So I went to the office and asked for Hinds' address. Dumb, huh?"

"Direct," I said.

"Yeah. Seems Hinds wasn't with the hospital anymore, hadn't been for about a week. Quit, they told me. I got an address, 600 Shell Street."

"Did you see her?"

"It's a he and I didn't. The reason I didn't was that on my way over there I got stopped. It was a Police car,

Steve. Two cops driving and another cop and a guy in civvies in the back seat. The back seat boys are the ones who got me. They got out and came over to my car and the police car drove away. The guy in civvies, he's new to me, got into the back seat and the cop got in front with me.

"This cop is a fat slob, MacSomething's his name, MacDougall or something like that, and he was very jolly, you know? What are you doing in our little town? That sort of routine, but friendly and that's about all I remember. The hard mug in the back seat must have sapped me. Again dumb, because I should have expected it and at least made a fight out of it. Maybe in daylight like that somebody would have . . ."

I shook my head. "They wouldn't have. Where'd they take you?"

"It ends there, Steve. All I remember after that is a lot of crazy dreams, mostly big revolving circles of black and white and . . . well, crazy stuff. Next thing is when I come to in the Lincoln Heights jug, and I didn't know where I was until they told me. Henly told me I was drunk. I told him to call you."

"O.K., Squint. You bed down here. I told the wife you'd be home in the morning. I'll sleep on the couch."

"You going to turn in?"

"Yeah."

I got Squint comfortable and then took blankets and sheets into the front room and made up the sofa there. I was going to smoke one cigarette and then hit the sack. I was going to sleep a good sleep and then in the morning take my story and my suspicions to Elwell. I figured that I could sell him the idea that Squint had been held in the Coastview Hospital and that he'd been turned loose after Elwell ordered his investigations. I thought I could get Elwell's authority to take Doctor Bayler into a little cement conference room and get the truth out of him, about Grange and Daisy Eller and Walker Emmitt and

about Squint. And then we could get the fat MacSomething and the two cops who'd been in the police car and find out who'd ordered Squint picked up.

And then the doubts about Elwell stirred up again and I couldn't help putting myself in his place. And from that start it was a cinch to dope out just how simple the whole thing could be rigged to let him out of it.

First Bayler, and he was too easy. He was probably up to his ears in it, had probably performed the abortion on Daisy himself and he'd take some discomfort and say just what he was told to say in order to save his own neck. And all he'd have to say was that he'd framed Daisy's story to fit Grange and had held Squint, both on Walker Emmitt's orders.

And the fat MacSomething and the two cops would have the same answers; Walker Emmitt's orders. Who could say no? Emmitt was dead.

I opened my eyes and recognized the ringing of the phone.

I stumbled through the dark to it and lifted the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Steve?" The voice sounded like it was coming through wet cotton.

"Who is this?"

"Stella . . . please come . . . hurt . . . please . . ."

There was silence.

"Stella?" I shouted. "Stella, what is it?" I jiggled the phone carriage. Nothing. I broke the connection and dialed 'O.'

"Coastview 6-5520." I waited and then the quick irritating buzz buzz signaled a busy line.

So Steve Cash fumbled into his clothes, dashed out to his car and was half way to Stella's before he realized he hadn't brought a gun.

Dumb, huh?

CHAPTER XVIII

I COULDN'T TAKE THE TIME to go back; the urgency of that wet cotton voice demanded speed. She'd been able to call, alone, and she wouldn't get that chance again, not from Ricco.

This time I parked in front, rode the elevator to the third floor and took the stairs, two at a time, the rest of the way. The door to 14 was shut, but the knob turned freely. I opened the door a crack and looked in; the hallway and what I could see of the big green and off-white room were bright with lights and seemed empty. I opened the door the rest of the way, closed it behind me and walked to the living room. At first I didn't see her.

She was a crumpled figure, face down near the desk that held the phone. The receiver dangled near her outstretched hand. I went to her, knelt and gently turned her over. Her face was a mass of discolored flesh, cut and stained with blood, both eyes were puffed and her lips were like a Ubangi's. She was wearing the black and white lounging pajamas and the top had been ripped open and her breasts were marked with bruises. I carried her to the couch and stretched her out and she moaned and managed to force one eye open a crack.

"Steve."

"Who?" I asked.

"Ricco." It was an effort for her to talk.

"Why?"

"Crazy. Told me about dope racket." Her words were spaced and each sounded alone. Like it was the last.

"Dirty racket, I wanted . . . get out. Crazy, hurts."

"Where'd he go?"

She rolled her head slowly to one side and back. "Out some . . . place. Get . . . me . . . away . . . Steve . . ."

I told her I would.

I stripped a blanket from the bed in the next room and brought it out. I managed to sit her up. I draped the blanket over her shoulders.

"Can you walk?"

She managed a nod and I helped her stand up and then she went limp.

"Can't," she said. "You go."

"I'll get you out," I told her.

I laid her on the couch and arranged the blanket around her and then leaned over to lift her.

"Steve, who . . . else . . . could . . . I . . . call . . ."

the last word was mostly a gurgle and a trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. And I felt her body relax.

She was dead.

I stood looking down at the battered face for several minutes. And the anger began growing in me.

Sure, she'd been a tramp. She'd lived by her body and the pleasure it gave and she'd been hard and tough and deliberate about it. She'd grabbed the fast buck and she'd known what she was doing and why and there wasn't any reason why anybody ought to be bothered by the way she'd ended; but I was. If it was some kind of a higher justice I was against it. Nobody deserved to die this way, alone and hurting. "Who else could I call?"

I covered her gently with the blanket and walked to the bar, found a bottle and took a large shot of bourbon, straight. And then another. And a spasm of anger shook me and I smashed the bottle against the counter and the rank smell of whiskey spread through the room.

I don't know how much I drank or how long I paced the big room. But the bottle had been full and was less than half that when I threw it across the room to smack against a large picture of a nude on the far wall. But I know that it was not long after that that I heard the

sound of the apartment door being opened and closed and I stood waiting near the hall entrance.

It was Ricco and he was alone.

He didn't see me; he walked toward the bedroom and then his eyes caught the blanketed figure on the couch, he took two more steps, turned, did a double take; and then he saw me.

He didn't have a gun because he didn't go for it. But his mouth dropped open and his eyes darted around the room, to the doorway behind me and finally settled on my lips.

"She's dead," I said.

His eyes flicked to her and back to my face. I took a step toward him and he tried to dodge around me to the door and my fist caught him on the side of the jaw. He swung at me, off balance, and I took it on my arm and drove a hard left into his soft belly that brought a grunt of pain. I laughed. He landed on my nose, but he left his jaw open doing it and the blow I landed hurt my fist. Another to the belly doubled him up and an uppercut straightened him before he fell. I kicked him twice before he could crawl away. He got up slowly.

"Steve," he said.

I hit him while his mouth was still open and barked my knuckles on his teeth. I liked it. He tried a looping right and I stepped inside it and flattened him with a left-right. He didn't get up that time. He sat and tried to get his jaw working.

"Get up," I told him, "before I kick your guts loose."

"Steve," he started and my foot caught him in the ribs and he screamed, not loud and not high.

"Get up," I said.

And I stood back and waited until he got to his feet. He was swaying a bit and I stepped in and planted a left on his face and the blood spurted from his nose as I felt the cartilage give. He'd have dropped again, but I caught his lapels and held him and smashed my fist into his battered nose and then let him fall.

He lay on the floor moaning and I walked to the bar and found another bottle and opened it. Both my hands hurt, but not enough to stop my getting a drink.

I didn't hear him. As I lowered the bottle I heard the grunt of effort and then felt the tearing of my coat sleeve and the sharp sting as the knife found flesh and ripped down my arm and there was the warm feel of blood running. I side-stepped the next plunge and reached for the bottle I'd dropped, but my hand knocked it off the far side of the counter. I managed to grab the neck of the first bottle I'd smashed before I got away and faced him.

His was a spring knife, with a six inch blade. He was crazy mad by that time and I was a match for him.

He didn't see the jagged bottle I held. He took a step toward me and I brought it up and his eyes went scared and he stopped. The blood slowly dripped from my arm to blend in the brown of the shag rug.

He got crafty. He took a step backward toward the hallway and I knew I couldn't let him go. I kept his pace. He made the hallway and half way down it with me following in what must have looked like a crazy waltz step.

"You're not going out," I said.

It stopped him for almost a minute and I could almost see him thinking it out. There wasn't any future for him in that room and he finally got it. He *was* going out. He stepped backward again.

This time I took a longer step, a step that brought me almost in range of the knife. I had to be there where he couldn't throw it before I could step in. I wanted to go in, block his thrust with my arm and club him with the bottle in my other hand, but the arm wouldn't respond. I couldn't raise it and I couldn't let him out so I went in anyway and at the last second he turned chicken, ducked me and ran back into the living room. He was at the desk when I caught him, fumbling in the drawer with one hand, holding the knife with the other and I rushed him so that he had to move out without the gun he sought.

You read it and it sounds planned and measured and

thought out, but it wasn't. It was deadly and all done on instinct. You don't really wait and measure your chances, not crazy the way we were. You wait because it makes you feel big to have him backing away from you and you feel that when you want to you can take him.

And now I stalked him and he backed to the big windows, felt the cold glass on his back and knew it was over for us. He rushed and I turned my shoulder into him, hoping to deflect the knife. I felt the back of my coat rip but there was no sting and I swung the jagged end of the bottle around at him with a clubbing motion, without aim, and I felt the bottle strike solidness and heard the high, horrible scream and I dropped the bottle and stumbled back from him and watched him as he sank slowly to the floor with a low, animal moan of fear and pain and his hands, covering his face, leaking blood between the fingers.

My knees felt weak and I sat on the floor and watched the room turn hazy and finally turn to deep blackness.

CHAPTER XIX

I OPENED MY EYES to brown shag, the rug of Ricco's big living room and I could make out voices that sounded like they came from an echo box.

"Jesus, he's a mess, huh, Doc?"

"We'll have to get him to the hospital. I've stopped most of the bleeding. Get him down to my car."

"O. K., Doc." That was Gus's voice. "How about the dame?"

"Ricco can't have her found here. Bring her over right away and we'll enter it hit and run. Bring a dress, she wouldn't be out in that outfit. What about him?"

"I'm going to take care of him."

"You're going to do just what I tell you to. There's been enough stupidity. I should check and find out what Elwell . . . Well, I'll have to use my own judgment. . . . Wait, I think maybe we'll leave Mr. Cash here with Stella."

"Look, Doc. . . ."

"Be quiet. Is he still out?"

I felt the sharp pain of a kick in the ribs and held back the cry that rose in my throat.

"He's still out."

"Where was Ricco this morning?"

"Morning? Oh, yeah. Well, he didn't get in until half past midnight and we brought the stuff right over to you. Then he came up here."

"Were you with him?"

"Yeah."

"Anybody see you?"

"No."

"What else?"

"I left and about two or so he come steaming into my place and told me he'd had a beef with Stella. Beat hell out of her, he said."

"You were alone?"

"Ginger was there."

"She didn't see him, Gus."

"She. . . . O.K. She does what I say."

"Go on about Ricco."

"We sit around and drink and he cools off some and then says he's coming here. After he leaves Ginger says he was so crazy looking when he come in that I get worried about maybe he done more to Stella than just beat hell out of her. So I come over and found this. So I got you. O.K.?"

"Yes. Now, listen. I'm going to take Ricco to the hospital and bandage him, then you take him to the boat. He hasn't been off of it since it came in, understand? He had an accident aboard. I came down and bandaged him, the

boat pitched and he fell while holding a . . . a . . . all right, a bottle. Got that? Have you got a gun that can't be traced? Fine. Wipe the butt clean of prints. Good. Now hit her on the head a few times. Go on, Gus, you can't hurt her."

The sound almost made me throw up.

"Harder, Gus."

I swallowed.

"Good, now wipe the barrel and get his prints on it." I felt the gun barrel in *my* hand and Gus's pressing against it.

"O.K., Doc."

"Get the knife and wipe it and then put Stella's prints on it. Good. We'll leave them together. As soon as Ricco is on his boat I'll have someone call the police about a disturbance here."

"What if he comes to?"

"It doesn't make any difference, he'll be locked in and he won't expect the police. And he doesn't know about our arrangements. Tear her pants off. It's supposed to be attempted rape."

"With her?"

"Never mind. It's enough to take him out of our hair. Let's get Ricco out."

I listened to the sounds of their leaving and the final click of the door closing. Then I got up. It took two tries, but I made it. My left arm was dead and when I finally made my feet, I swayed across the room to the bar and behind it where the bottle lay on the floor, on its side, still with liquor in it. A drink helped. I knew I had to hurry. I made my way to Stella and covered her without looking at her. The knife was on the floor by the sofa and I wiped it clean. There wasn't any use wiping anything else but the gun. Then I looked for a way out.

The front bedroom windows overlooked the sidestreet; too public for me. The back bedroom windows looked out on the alley. I got one open, unhooked the screen and leaned out. Four stories below the cluster of garbage

and trash cans looked tiny. There was a ledge about a foot wide and at the sill level of the window, but I didn't think much of my chances of going anyplace on it. The rest of the apartment offered nothing better. The kitchen was without a back door, served by a dumb waiter operated by a control button. And it wouldn't move down or up until the door was tightly closed.

I went back to the bedroom.

I only had the use of one arm and the walls of the building were smooth and I knew I didn't have much of a chance, but it was a better one than I'd have if I stayed. The frame would fit neatly, neatly enough for everybody, including Elwell, even if he was on the level. Me, smelling drunk, and Stella dead and nobody else around. It was a nice plan and neater than the one hung on Grange.

I worked the screen off its hooks, dropped it to the alley and climbed out onto the ledge. In the gathering light I could see a window some twenty feet along the ledge, my goal, but leaving the one I was anchored to was a tough job.

I inched my left foot along the ledge, stopped and drew my right foot to it and then inched again until my right arm was fully extended, holding the window frame. Slowly I let go and tried to find purchase with my fingers on the cold cement wall.

Painfully I moved along the wall, my body hugging it in a hope to find some adhesive in mere closeness. Inch by inch I moved and my fingers scratched and dug to find a hold. It wasn't until I was within two feet of my goal that I worried about how I was going to get in the window. I had to edge past it so that I could work on it with my right hand.

The screen was hooked and my fingers could find no opening in the tiny crack at the top. And I had my head turned forward and couldn't or wouldn't dare turn it to look back at the futile problem. I thought of kicking it, but I was afraid I'd lose my precious balance in the act of

drawing back my foot. I had to give up; I couldn't open it.

And I couldn't go back, I couldn't turn on that narrow ledge. I was committed to forward progress.

I kept my snail's pace along the shelf and the throbbing in my arms fought against my fear of falling. Slowly I approached another window, this one waist high and opaque. A bathroom window, and as I neared it, I could see the four inch space between its top and the wall. I edged past it, holding my breath, and then grabbed the frame with my good arm and hooked my elbow over the frame. For the first time I relaxed. Only then did I notice the warm seeping down my left arm. I looked down and my hand was covered with my blood, which dripped down my fingers and onto the ledge.

The dizzy weak feeling was taking over and quickly I forced the window down as far as it would go. Getting in that small opening took all of my strength. I managed to get my feet on the sill and half my body through and then there was nothing to hold or lean on in the room and I had to fall forward, breaking the drop partially with my right arm and rolling onto the tile floor.

The shock and force brought waves of blackness and flashing light into my head. I don't know how long I lay on the floor there before I was able to get up and lean against the sink and run cold water over my head.

The pink tile of the floor was splashed red with blood. I shed my coat and, with my good arm and my teeth managed to tie a towel around the knife cut. Then I sat on the johnny and fought down a desire to vomit.

I heard the footsteps coming toward the bathroom, but there wasn't a damned thing I could or wanted to do about it. Whatever had given me the strength to walk that narrow ledge, to fight off the blackening effect of loss of blood, and to survive the final drop onto the hard floor of that private sanctuary was gone. I could only sit. So I sat.

And the door opened and in walked the most beautiful

woman in the world. She was over fifty and her hair was tied up in curlers and her face was white with some goo and her chins were held up with a harness and her barrel-like figure was wrapped in a horrible purple robe, but to me she was beautiful because she didn't scream. She looked at me occupying her most personal piece of furniture, a stranger, bearded and bloody, and all she said was:

"Well!"

I'll always love her.

CHAPTER XX

HER EYES quickly took in the open window and the blood stained tile and the towel around my arm. She started talking and she talked steadily as she closed the window, undid the towel and inspected my wound, rewrapped my arm neatly with a clean towel and then mopped up the blood from the floor.

"Badly hurt? You came along that little ledge, probably from that gangster's across the hall. That's a pretty bad cut, you'll need a doctor for some stitches. My husband was a doctor, so I'm used to things like this. Not your coming into my bathroom window, the wound, I mean. I'll clean this floor up a bit, you probably left a trail and they'll figure it out sooner or later. There, that's enough. Now we've got to get you attended to. Know a doctor? It isn't a gunshot wound, so I suppose Mark can take care of it without making a fuss. You wouldn't want that, I know. I'll call him. How soon will they miss you?"

"Any time now," I said. "The police are supposed to find me. There's a dead girl in there."

"Sssss . . . Hear that?"

I could make out the faint screaming of a siren.

"They're arriving. I'll call Mark. He lives in Coastview and practices in Los Angeles. He won't like getting out of bed at this hour." She paused at the door. "You didn't kill that girl?"

I shook my head.

"I didn't think so. I'll only be a minute."

She was gone closer to ten minutes and during that time I tried to figure my next move. Elwell was out. Bayler had mentioned his name and something about checking with him. And even if he wasn't in it the frame fit too neatly. There wasn't any reason for him to believe me. I had to get out and I had to do it before the cops got nosing around this apartment.

The woman came back.

"I didn't call him," she said. "The whole building is filled with police and they're looking for you. I talked to one in the hall. We've got to get you out before they start searching the apartments. I don't suppose you could wear one of my dresses? No, that's too corny. Oh, by the way, I'm Mrs. Coldman. My friends call me Bess."

"I'm Steve Cash," I said. "You said they're looking for me. Is it by name or description?"

"Oh, no. The policeman I talked to asked me if I'd seen anyone and I said I hadn't and he said a girl had been beaten and whoever did it might still be in the building."

"And they'll search here?"

"I think so," she said. "Any ideas about getting out?"

"Nothing, outside of just walking out. I don't suppose that would do."

"No, they'd stop you and question you. You don't have any business here."

"Not now," I said.

"Yes. And at this hour . . . well, I wouldn't worry about my reputation, I don't think they'd believe you'd

spent the night with me. Twenty years ago, perhaps . . . Let me think."

She found cigarettes in her robe pocket, offered me one and lit it and her own. She sat on the edge of the tub, smoking, her brow wrinkled in thought.

Finally she said, "Would you trust George?"

"Who is he?"

"Sort of a janitor and handyman around here. He wouldn't have to see you and I wouldn't tell him any more than I had to."

"Whatever you say."

"I'll get him up here. He wears those coverall things. I do hope he wears something beneath them."

I waited a half hour. She'd closed the door on her way out and I left it that way. I did hear the front door chimes sound; that was about ten minutes after she'd left. But I couldn't hear any talk. When she came back she was carrying a pair of blue coveralls and a matching blue cap.

"He wasn't wearing anything underneath them," she said. "He had to go back down and put another pair over the ones he was wearing. He brought the extra cap in his pocket. He left some tools for you to carry. There's a service elevator at the end of the hall and you're to go down to the basement in it. It's the only one that goes to the basement and George will wait at the main floor and bring it up as soon as you get out of it and sort of keep it occupied until you get away. He says there aren't any police down there, the only one he saw on both trips is the one in the hall. He's right outside of that apartment door."

"I hope he doesn't know me," I said.

"Would he?"

"He might, I know some of the cops here."

"Don't look at him . . . or something."

"I'll manage."

"I'm sure you will. When you get to the basement, you unlock the door there. George left the key. It leads to some steps that go up to the alley. George said you should

carry a garbage can out with you and just set it out where the others are and then you can sort of wander off."

I stood up and took a few steps and I didn't feel too bad. I figured I could make it. Bess helped me into the coveralls and we went out to the front room. George had left me a wrench and a hammer along with the key. I pulled the cap down so the bill shaded my eyes and face and picked up the tools.

"O.K.?" I asked.

"Keep looking at the floor," she said.

"All right." I didn't know what else to say to her. I didn't know how to thank her. "I don't know just how to say what I ought to," I tried.

"You don't have to say anything. You get to a doctor with that arm."

"All right. I think you're wonderful," I told her.

"I'm an old, impulsive, opinionated woman, Steve. I make up my mind quickly and stick to it and I've been hurt a lot of times because I was wrong and too stubborn to admit it. I don't think I'm wrong this time."

"You're not," I said. "Some day I'll come back and tell you the whole thing."

"All right, Steve. Be careful and I'll keep my fingers crossed. Call me when you're safe; I'll be worried."

"I'll call," I promised.

I opened the door and stepped out. A quick glance down the hall showed me the cop at Ricco's door.

"I hope it'll work all right now, Mrs. Coldman," I said and she grinned at me before she said, "I hope so, too," and closed the door.

I made a great show of examining my wrench as I walked down the hall. I didn't look at the cop and he didn't stop me and I went to the service elevator door and pushed the button. And I could feel the sweat on my back and my forehead as I waited. And once in the elevator and it purring slowly downward I relaxed.

In the basement I waited until the elevator started upward and then found the door and unlocked it and picked

up a garbage can and carried it to and up the steps into the alley. I'd locked the basement door from the outside because I figured that sooner or later the cops would get around to it and finding it open would give them a trail. The longer they spent at the apartment house the better I'd like it. I put the garbage can down with some others and walked slowly down the alley, showing a lot of interest in the blank green wall of the building. I walked past the apartment house and another building and then found a narrow passageway that led to the street. In front three police cars and Best's big Cad were parked and two cops lounged at the entrance.

I got to my car and got in and of course the keys were in my left pants pocket under the coveralls, so I had to get out and stand up to get them. I drove away at what I hoped was a normal speed. I was home in a little better than a half hour. Squint was still asleep and the sun was just reaching through the bedroom window at him. I didn't wake him.

I called Ross Adams, told him about the cut and he said he'd be over. Then I called Bess Coldman.

"You can uncross your fingers," I said.

"Good."

"I'll keep that promise too," I said.

"All right."

I hung up. I didn't know whether the cops had put a tap on the lines into the apartment house or not, but I didn't want to take any chances. When Ross arrived he looked at my arm and then took ten stitches in the cut and bandaged it.

"Get some rest," he said, "you look like hell. How's the other one?"

"He'll wake up fine. You get some sleep."

"Right."

"I suppose this was an accident?"

"Cut myself shaving," I said.

He shrugged. "I thought it was something like that." I'd taken off the coveralls and the cap as soon as I'd

arrived and now I shucked my pants and shoes and sox and crawled into the bed on the sofa. I was a dead duck and ready for sleep and I closed my eyes and the phone rang.

I said Damn, aloud, and went to it and picked up the receiver.

"Mr. Cash?" It was the voice that went with the honey-colored hair and the curious green eyes. I couldn't help but recognize that.

"Yes."

"This is Sue Elwell. I have to talk to you. Could you meet me?"

"Where and when?" I asked.

"At Five Arch Point as soon as you can get there."

I looked at the inviting bed on the sofa, sighed and said, "O.K. I'll leave now."

CHAPTER XXI

FIVE ARCH POINT is at the end of a dusty, rutted dirt road that winds through three or four miles of barren sandy no man's land a few miles up the coast from Coastview. A sand dune hides the point from the highway, and the place is private and usually deserted.

Sue's Cad was parked on the road, but she wasn't in it. I pulled up behind it and pulled the brake on and got out and followed the path down to the beach. The tide was well out and the five arches through the rock of the point were clear of water. Sue was sitting on the still damp sand, crossed legged, idly molding a castle. She didn't look up until my shadow fell across her sandpile.

I sat down beside her without saying anything. I had

taken time to shave and I hoped I didn't look as bad as I knew I did.

After that one quick glance at me she went back to her building. She was building a tower for the castle, packing the damp sand so that it would hold its shape and even as she talked she kept working on it, not looking at me at all.

"I used to come here when I was younger, we had picnics here; Clara and I and some of the other kids we knew in Coastview, and later we used to come here after the movies at night and park," she said.

I didn't say anything and she went on building the tower.

"There was a girl I used to double date with, movies and dances and things before I went away to school. I hadn't seen her since I've been home and I wanted to, so I called her house and her mother told me . . . well, she's dead."

"When did she die and how?" I asked.

"Her mother didn't tell me, I really didn't ask. It was a shock and I didn't know what to say, so I just said I was sorry. It's hard to know what to say at a time like that, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And later I met Tom Bryant, he's the boy who took her out mostly then, and I asked him about it, yesterday it was I saw him. He said she got into trouble and had an abortion and died."

"When?"

"About six months ago. He said it was all very hush-hush and nobody knew for sure who the man was or who did the operation or anything. Maybe her folks know, but he said they never said anything about it to anyone. He wasn't going with her anymore. He said he didn't know of any steady boy friend that she had at the time. I told Dad about it."

"And?"

"He said people always talked too much about things they didn't know. But now I know."

"You know?"

"At least I'm sure. Last night I went to a dance at the Club and Charlie Cox was there, he's her brother. He was pretty drunk and we went outside and I asked him about Gloria and he told me he knew it was Doctor Bayler who did the operation, he said Gloria told him that. But Dad won't believe it and he won't do anything about it."

"And you want me to?"

"I don't think it's right to have it happen and nobody do anything about it. She was young and there might be others."

"I don't know what I can do," I said.

"Will you try?"

"All right," I said, "I'll try."

"My father wouldn't even try. He wouldn't do anything and he could. And you accused him of murder and he didn't do anything about that."

And then, without any preamble, she began to cry. And I looked down and her sand castle had crumbled.

I got my right arm around her so that she could cry against my shoulder and said, "Stop it."

Her hair smelled like sweet peas, but not strong, just a hint and her ear was pink and soft. "Stop it," I said.

She slipped her arms around me and her cheek was soft against mine and her voice was a tickling whisper in my ear.

"Steve, take me away some place."

"You're just a kid," I told her. "You've run into some nasty realities and it's smashed your playhouse."

I tried to pull away, but her arms held me. She drew her head back and looked at me and her hand stroked my cheek and then her lips were against mine and she murmured, "I'm a woman, Steve."

She was skillful where I was clumsy and her body all over was the new bread honey-brown and she was

strong in her passion and eager and afterwards she danced into the surf and then along the beach so that the slight breeze dried her and when she came back she was cool to touch and her lips had the salt taste of the sea.

She said, "I love you, Steve." And she said it simply and honestly and I couldn't bring myself to lie, so I didn't.

I slept and when I woke she was gone and the sun was straight above me. Scrawled in the sand was the message:

I LOVE YOU, DARLING.

I drove back to Coastview and parked in front of the police station. This time a power mover was trimming the green lawn and the keep off the grass signs were piled neatly on the side of the walk. I went up to the Chief's office. The Mick clicked the inner-com without asking, announced me and then told me to go right in.

This time the Chief was on his feet and greeted me with a fat warm handshake. Hope drew a chair up to the desk for me and arranged his next to it. We all sat down and exchanged smiles.

"All right," Best said, "what can we do for you?" His voice promised me that they'd go out and kick the hell out of anybody I named if I wanted it. I didn't.

"You got a fat slob of a cop called Mac something; MacDougall, maybe?"

"MacDougall," Best said. "Yes, sir, Steve, we got a MacDougall."

"I'd like to talk to him," I said. "Here."

"I'll get him," Hope said. He got up and strode to the door like an exit at the second act curtain. After five minutes of silence, between the Chief and me, he was back. Behind him was a fat, greasy haired, pig-eyed mean faced cop in uniform.

"Here he is, Steve," Hope said. "Mac, this is Steve Cash."

I ignored the fat character's hand and told him to sit

down. He took Hope's chair and Hope drew up another.

"You know Squint Lewis?" I asked.

"Yeah. Know him when I see him. We ain't friends."

"You know him well enough that the day before yesterday you had his car stopped and you and a goon who was with you talked to him, and while you talked the goon sapped him. You know him well enough for that, don't you?"

"Well, now . . ."

He was interrupted by Best.

"Goddammit, Steve, this bastard wasn't carrying out no orders of mine. I'll break this son-of-a-bitch so far down he'll have to stand on tip toes to see daylight."

"Now, Chief," Mac started.

"Don't Chief me, you slob bastard. All I want out of you is quiet."

"Quit it," I said to Best. "I want him to answer some questions. Who was the goon?"

"Why, Buster Loop, he works for Moss."

"Who do you work for?"

"I do what I'm told."

"Who told you to pick up Squint and sap him?"

"I didn't sap him."

I reached across and pulled the fat man's tie, "You know what I mean," I said.

"Walker Emmitt gave me the orders."

"What did you do with Squint after you picked him up?"

"Just what I was told to do. I took him out to the hospital and turned him over to the Doc."

"Bayler?"

"Yeah."

"O.K. Have him locked up some place," I told Best. "We may want him later."

The fat man shrugged and got up. "I done what I was told to," he said. Hope led him out of the room.

"The dirty bastard," Best said.

"He done what he was told," I said.

"What? Oh, yeah."

Hope came back. "He's in a cell, he'll be there when we want him."

"I want to borrow a gun," I said.

"Now, Steve." It was Best.

"You can lend me one or I can go home and get mine. I'm going out and have a little chat with Doctor Bayler. I think I can persuade him to talk and when he does we're going to know a lot about who's behind things here."

CHAPTER XXII

HOPE WENT OUT and Best and I sat in our cozy silence for ten minutes. Once Best grunted and handed a cigar toward me. I shook my head, no. Hope came back.

"What did Elwell say?" I asked.

"He gave me hell," he said. "If you want to go see Bayler with a gun in your hand you can go see him that way. With us or alone." He grinned again. "And as far as I'm concerned, it's alone. I want no part of it."

"All right," I said. I turned to Best. "I hear there was some excitement this morning."

"Dame got knocked off; Ricco's girl."

"He call you?" I asked.

"Phone tip about a disturbance."

"Did Ricco do it?"

"I sent Sgt. Peters out to pick him up, but he's in the hospital. Seems he had an accident on his boat and got cut up some. Fell on a bottle."

"I suppose Bayler treated him?" I asked.

"According to Peters."

"Maybe I'll ask some questions about that, too. I'll shove off. Where's the gun?"

"We'll pick it up at the desk," Hope said.

We drove past the green apartment building where Stella had died, and further along, past the big white Elwell house, and I thought about Sue and the honey brown loveliness of her, and finally we parked in front of the Coastview Hospital. Inside, a white haired woman, stern-faced and terse, told us Doctor Bayler was out.

"Out where?" I asked.

"Doctor Bayler's whereabouts . . ." she started.

"Police," I told her. "Flash your badge, Chief."

Best flashed his badge.

"You don't impress me, Frank," she said. "The Doctor didn't say where he was going."

"When did he leave?" I asked.

"Where's your badge?" she asked.

"Now, Norma," Best said.

"He left about ten minutes ago."

"We must have passed him," I told Best. "Did you see his car?"

"No. He could have gone down Wave, a block above Seaside."

A heavy set, white faced, strange eyed character wearing white shoes, white pants and a white smock walked up to the desk. He didn't look at anything, and his walk was like he was stepping on eggs, but it was all right because he didn't weigh an ounce. His head was bald and as white as his face and he might have crawled out from under a rock.

"I need my key, Norma," he said. "It's time for the treatments and I need my key."

"The Doctor isn't here," she said.

"I need the key because it's time now."

"You'll have to wait for the Doctor," she said. "You know you have to wait for the Doctor."

"But it's the time."

Stern-face turned away from him, and he stood, without expression, waiting.

"Hello, Lee," Best said.

The white man looked without looking. "Hello," he said. "I need the key."

"Lee?" I asked. Nobody answered me. "Lee Hinds?"

The white man looked through me. "Hello," he said.

"Lee," Stern-face told him, "you go back and wait until the doctor comes. You know you can't have the key until he comes back."

"But it's the time."

"Let him have the key," I said.

Stern-face looked startled. "What?"

"Let him have the key," I repeated, "it's the time."

"Really," she said, "you'll have to leave. You can't give orders around here."

"You got any handcuffs, Frank?" I asked.

"Handcuffs?"

"You've heard of them," I told him. "Handcuffs, you use them to snap a prisoner's wrists together. Remember?"

"I know what they are. I don't have any."

"Can you arrest her without them?"

"Arrest . . ."

"Let's not go through that again," I said. "I want her arrested and I want it done now and I want Lee to have the key he wants. It's so simple. Just arrest her. Or," I added, "shall I call Elwell?"

"You're under arrest, Norma."

"You're out of your mind, Frank."

"If you need help," I told him, "call the station. And you, sister," I pointed at her. "You're going to get up from that desk and sit quietly over in that chair away from a phone and you're going to be quiet or I'm going to have to slap you across the jaw with a gun butt, much as I'd hate to hurt a lady. Understand?"

Best was lost. Stern-face looked at me a few seconds and then wilted. She got up and walked to the chair and sat down.

"You didn't think it could last forever, did you?" I asked. She didn't say anything. "Who called Bayler?" She was silent. "You're going to tell me that," I said. "He got

a warning and he took a runout powder and he didn't even tip you off, so here you are holding the bag for him. So you're going to tell, aren't you?"

"I don't know," she said. Her voice was hopeless and her shoulders sagged against the chair and her sternness was gone along with the hope. "He has a private line in his office that doesn't go through the switchboard."

"Watch her, Frank," I told him. I turned to Lee.

"Where's the key?" I asked.

"In the desk, in the drawer of the desk, the top one."

I opened it and fumbled around until I found a single key. I held it up. Lee reached for it and I let him take it. He turned and started down the hall and I followed him. There was a large wall section of cabinets and Lee went to it and opened one of them with the key and took out a towel-covered tray. He carefully locked the cabinet and then, holding the tray in one hand and the key in the other he turned back and started up the hall again. At an oak paneled door near the front desk he stopped and knocked lightly. And he stood and waited, listening. In gold leaf on the door was printed 'Milton Bayler, M.D.'

"He isn't there, Lee," I said.

"It's the time," Lee said without turning.

I went to him and touched his arm and he looked through me again.

"He isn't there so you'll have to do it alone," I said. "Can you?"

"I do it," he said, "but the Doctor is with me."

"Not this time," I said, "I'll go with you."

It took him a full three minutes to make up his mind and then he turned from the door and asked, "Are you a Doctor?" I nodded and that satisfied him. He led me back down the hall past the cabinets and around the corner where the hall intersected another. We ended up outside a room at the back of the building and Lee knocked twice. After a second there was a husky voice from behind the door.

"Yeah?"

"It's the time," Lee said.

I heard the door being unlocked and then Lee turned the knob and went in ahead of me. Walking away from us toward the big easy chair in front of the television set in the far corner was a big, bullet headed man. A quick glance showed me the room wasn't a hospital room. The bed was a double and there was the easy chair and the television and a radio and a coffee table and several other chairs.

The big guy settled into the chair. "You're late," he said without looking around.

"Norma wouldn't give me the key because the Doctor is away," Lee explained. And as he talked he put the tray on the coffee table and uncovered it. I could see the hypo syringe and I watched as he prepared the white powdered cocaine for the injection.

"But this Doctor got the key for me and is here to take the Doctor's place. The others will be waiting too."

At the words 'this doctor' the big guy swung his head around and I got my first look at his face. It was Nick Moss, Tony's brother and wanted for murder and robbery and a reward on his head holed up here in safety and comfort, and, of course, on the junk.

"Doctor?" he said. His face was like Tony's, but thinner and he had a pallor from the lack of sun.

I had the gun in my hand then because I wanted him and I didn't think he'd be around if I left and came back for him; Norma's arrest and Bayler's runout wouldn't be kept very secret.

"Police," I said.

"Get him, Lee."

The white man looked up from his work, took in the gun and the instructions and digested them and for the first time I felt that he was actually seeing through the strange holes that were his eyes. He started toward me, slowly, deliberately. The others were waiting because it was the time and he was late, but he'd had his and he was as high as a junkie can get and just as crazy and telling

him about the gun and threatening to shoot him wouldn't do one damned bit of good and I knew it and Nick knew it, and Lee didn't care about anything but the instructions.

I shot him in the chest and it jolted him and stopped him for a few seconds and then he started again and the smock was turning red. The pause gave me just enough time to aim a shot at his leg and I was lucky to hit him in the knee and that brought him down and I swung the gun at Nick who was almost to the straight chair that held his shoulder holster and the shot caught him in the side and he lunged for the chair, missed and sprawled onto the floor.

It was the time, but he hadn't been ready.

CHAPTER XXIII

I LEFT HIM where he'd fallen and went back up the hall to the desk and prodded Best into action. Norma sat and looked at nothing while Best called the station and gave his instructions for help. I took the phone from him:

"Vogel?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Is Hope there? This is Steve Cash."

"Yes. You want to talk to Hope?"

"Yeah."

"Hello?" It was Hope's voice.

"Cash here," I said. "Come out to the hospital."

"Right." He hung up.

I called Elwell's number and the voice of the butler answered. "Mr. Elwell isn't in."

"I have to get in touch with him," I said. "Can you tell me where he went?"

"He said he was going to the office."

"How long ago was that?"

"About a half an hour."

I said thanks and hung up. A half hour, that was just about the time Best and I had passed Elwell's house. And about the time Bayler left the hospital. And Hope had called Elwell and told him I was going to talk to Bayler with a gun in my hand and anxious for answers.

A crowd of nurses and patients who could walk milled around the desk in the lobby and everyone had a story and none of them were near knowing anything. The cops arrived, three cars full, and Hope with them. Best, Hope and I went back to the room where Nick Moss was bleeding. He was still out and the white man was dead. Hope went back to try and get some doctors out to the hospital and Best and I got the big gangster onto his bed and bared to the waist. The wound was an ugly tear just under the ribs and Best dabbed at it with a towel.

"You're not doing any good," I said. "What are you waiting for?"

"Waiting?"

"You're going to pick up Tony Moss, aren't you?"

Best didn't like the idea. He didn't like any part of it and the longer he thought about it, the less he liked it.

Finally he alibied: "Tony might not be in this."

"Balls," I said. "Tony set it up for his brother, he had to. He's in it over his navel and it's a perfect rap to hang on him. If you don't do it, the Feds will."

Hope came in. "I've got three local Docs coming. Hell of a hospital with only one Doc and him missing."

"Right now," I said, "this thing is crying for the Feds. Nick is wanted by the FBI and the dope angle will interest the Narcotics Bureau."

"Dope?" It was Hope.

"Hinds was the shot boy, a junkie himself, he took care of the addicts who lived here. They'll be out screaming any time now because it's past their feeding. I think Best ought to call some law. And I think he ought to pick

up Tony Moss before the Feds arrive and suggest it to him. He might look a little better."

I got the look that passed between Best and Hope.

"Elwell isn't home," I said.

"I know," Hope admitted. "I tried there and he's supposed to be at his office, but he isn't."

"I didn't bother to check," I said.

A little, owl-faced man bustled in and proclaimed himself Doctor Fisher and shooed us out of the room. We rounded up a couple of hospital attendants and sent them after Lee's body and Best posted a couple of armed cops at the door to Moss's room. The other doctors were busy trying to calm the patients, including the hopheads who had begun crying for their shots.

I left Hope and Best and started prowling the rooms. Number 20 paid off. The chart on the end of the bed read 'Riccardo Guerentez'! It was Ricco. He was asleep or out, his head bandaged like a mummy with small openings for his nose and mouth. I stood looking down at him, debating whether to try and get him alive when a nurse came in. She was startled at finding me there, but there was so much confusion that she couldn't be sure I didn't belong.

"How is he?" I asked.

"I . . . I don't know, Doctor. You are a doctor?"

"Police," I said. "Is he all right?"

"Yes, he's all right."

She went to the bed and felt his pulse and then looked thoughtful and dropped his arm and started for the door and then came back and felt again.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

But she was at the door and out of it without answering and when she came back there was a tall sandy haired, thin man with her who told me to get out.

"Police," I said.

"I can't help that," he told me. "Get out until I've dealt with this." So I got out.

Back at the desk Hope was just putting down the phone.

"Elwell," he said. "He's coming right over."

"Where was he?"

"His office. I left word there that he should call. He just did."

"What am I going to book Norma on?" Best asked.

Hope shrugged. "Wait for Elwell," he said, "he's coming right over. Won't be fifteen minutes."

"Have you got anybody out looking for Bayler?" I asked.

"I'm going to wait for Tom," Best said. "He'll know what to do."

"You're going to wait until word of Nick's capture leaks out and. . . ." That was as far as I got. The sound of two gun shots interrupted me. I was down the hall and around the corner before Best got his mouth closed.

There weren't any cops in front of Nick's room, the door was open and as I raced toward it a goon with a gun stepped out backward, holding the gun toward the room until the sound of my feet turned him and the gun was pointed at me and a slug from it whanged the wall behind me. I sprawled flat and there was another shot and I heard someone from back of me say 'goddam, let me back,' and I looked over my shoulder in time to see a man's backside disappear around the corner.

In front of me the goon had been joined by another. I lay still.

"All clear, Tony," one of the goons said.

And then Tony Moss came out of the room and behind him two guys carrying Nick and behind them two more pointing guns into the room. But in spite of the guns the little owl-faced Doctor Fisher followed them out into the hall.

"I've warned you," he said, "he will die without medical attention."

"I'll take care of that, Doc," Tony said. "You go back in there and sit awhile."

The four guns took over the hallway, standing there while the other two and their burden and Tony went out the back door. I heard the sound of a motor and then the four goons backed down the hall to the door.

"It ain't going to be safe for anyone to come out real soon," one of them said, and for emphasis he threw a shot at the wall behind me. They backed out and the door slammed closed.

I got up and the crowd started around the corner.

Best was second in line behind a big cop and behind Best came Hope and a group of nurses and cops and patients.

"Keep them back," I told Best and then went down to the room door where Doctor Fisher was standing. He was facing the back door and didn't turn until I touched him on the shoulder.

"I did get him bandaged, but he shouldn't have been moved," he said. "He shouldn't have been moved at all. It'll start bleeding again."

"Where are the cops?" I asked. But by that time I saw them coming out of the room. "Nice work," I said.

"What the hell is all this?" Best asked.

"Tony came after his brother," I said, "and your cops let him take him."

"Let him, every son of a bitch had a gun he wanted to use," one of the cops said. "I wasn't risking my neck for no bastard like Nick Moss."

I shrugged. "Still waiting for Elwell, Frank?" I asked. And then Frank Best got sore.

"Goddammit," he said, "you think you're so smart now that you snowed Elwell. You think you ought to be running my office and maybe I don't mind that, but it ain't your ass that'll be in a sling. You're sitting right with the Superchief because you sucked around and all the time somebody should have kicked your tail out of town before you managed to stir up all this stink."

"You want to try, Frank?" I asked.

Hope shoved Best back. "This isn't the way, Frank," he said. "Wait for the tests, wait for that."

And then a big voice said:

"I don't give a damn what your orders are, if Best is down there I'm going to see him. I'm Tom Elwell."

And then we waited until he walked down the hall to us. He stood for a minute and just looked, first at Hope and Best and then at me.

Finally: "Well, I hope this does whatever you wanted done, Cash. I hope this winds it up."

"It does," I said, "it winds it up so tight that the whole thing is ready to break into pieces."

And I grinned at him.

CHAPTER XXIV

ELWELL GAVE THE ORDERS. The FBI was called. The Narcotics Bureau was called. An armed squad of cops was sent to raid Moss's place. Elwell made a phone call from a pay booth in the hall and I couldn't overhear. Then he had Norma put under guard and herded Best, Hope and me into Moss's room where we waited for the Feds to arrive. And it was there that we gave Elwell the whole story.

"And," Best said, "when we got here Bayler was out. . . ."

"Powdered," I said.

"Anyway, Lee came up to the desk and asked for the key and then Steve told me to arrest Norma and he gave Lee the key."

"Why?" Elwell asked. I explained that Squint was back and what had happened to him.

"Squint found out that both Doctor Grange and Alp

had talked to Lee," I said. "And when Squint wanted to, Norma told him Lee wasn't employed here anymore. He was junked to the eyeballs and I figured that's what made Grange and Alp wonder about him, either that or they got something from him when they talked to him. Maybe Grange talked to Bayler, asked for an explanation and got one that satisfied him for a while, but Bayler knew it wouldn't hold too long, so the first chance he got, he hung the frame on him. And when he knew that it wouldn't stick, he had him killed. With Alp it was just a case of having Ricco work him over to find out how much he got from Lee. Ricco went too far. And with Squint, they just didn't feel safe with him being curious about Lee. But they couldn't knock him off, not when you'd put the heat on to have him found."

"How did they know?" Elwell asked.

"Who called Walker Emmitt?" I asked. "And who got the word to Tony Moss so that he'd come for his brother? And who tipped Bayler that I was coming out here?"

Elwell shrugged. "Then you don't think it ends with Bayler?"

"We won't find him alive," I said.

"So?"

"You're smarter than that," I said. "He's dead or near it right now and it's because he's about the last link with the guy who was running your town."

"Maybe Moss. . . ." Best started.

"Moss isn't the guy behind all this," I said. "He holed his brother up here and he had to deal with Bayler to do that. It was one of Moss's goons who was with the cop MacDougall when Squint was picked up. I think that's what Moss supplied; guns and strong arms and maybe some dough. He might even have helped push the junk they didn't use here for their own private addicts. Bayler seems to have been pretty greedy. He did a lot of abortions. The Eller girl and Gloria Cox for two anyway."

I watched Elwell and he blinked at the name Gloria Cox.

"But," I went on, "Moss wouldn't have tipped Bayler, even if he knew I was coming here, without getting his brother out before anything started."

There was a silence and I waited while Elwell cut and lit a cigar.

"Isn't anyone going to ask me who knew I was coming out here?" I asked.

"Who did?" Hope asked. It was almost a whisper.

"You're all in this room," I said.

Elwell puffed the cigar thoughtfully. "I'm not sure I like the implication," he said.

"I told Frank and Hope that I was coming out here," I said, "Hope called you and told you. Who else knew?"

"Wait a minute," Hope said. "When I got that gun for you I told Vogel what it was for and there were at least three people who heard me. And when I called Mr. Elwell I did it from the phone on Vogel's desk and there were a lot of people around who heard that conversation. So there's more than us three."

"And who knew Emmitt was to be picked up?" I asked.

"Ah, hell," Best said, "I gave the order to a whole room full of cops."

"Does that satisfy you, Cash?" Elwell asked.

"You know what'll satisfy me," I told him. "When I get the one who ordered Grange's murder. I haven't got him yet."

"It could well have been Bayler," Elwell said. "Any tool he employed in the Police Department could have tipped him that you were coming and armed, and by my authority."

"Consent," I said.

"No matter. So he knew the game was up and no time to do anything but run. If he was under another he'd have run to them, wouldn't he? If you'd care to search my house . . ." Elwell paused and looked at me through cigar smoke. "And the fact that Walker Emmitt was

headed toward the hospital, tipped by that same tool in the police department . . . You won't accept that?"

"Will you?" I asked. "It's a lot of money."

"I'll give you my check now."

"No," I said. "It's too easy. Wrap it all up and hang it on Bayler. I might be able to sell it to Mister Grange, but I can't sell it to myself. Bayler won't get far, the Feds will be interested in him and he's going to show up and if he does he'll talk. If he's alive. I'll bet the ten grand you're so willing to pay me that he'll be another corpse when they find him. Would that prove something?"

"Perhaps."

"I've got a hunch," I said. "Ricco is here and I think Ricco might know who was behind Bayler. I think maybe we ought to try to talk to Ricco. Maybe when he knows that Bayler ran out and didn't do anything about him, he'll put the finger on the big shot."

"Why?" Elwell asked. "Why on both counts?"

"I think he knows the big shot because I think he was the one who ran the junk into Coastview on his boat. And I think he'll talk if Best will put the arm on him for the murder of his girl, Stella Regan. With Bayler gone, so has his alibi."

"I don't follow you," Elwell said.

Best explained. "He had a story about falling on a bottle while he was on his boat and according to Sgt. Peters, Bayler said he treated Ricco before Stella died, that Ricco was here in the hospital at midnight and that's a couple of hours before the medic set the time of Stella's death."

"Then let's talk to Ricco," Elwell said.

I explained that I'd been in his hospital room and was shooed out by a doctor and I described him and Elwell sent Best after the Doctor. When Best left Hope said:

"I think it's Bayler and I'm sure that when they get

him it will prove it, Walker Emmitt and Bayler were damned close, as I remember."

"It would make a neat package," I said.

Elwell was silent.

Best came back, ushering the sandy haired thin man into the room. He introduced himself as Doctor Phillips.

We all mumbled our names and shook hands with him.

"Of course," he said, "I recognized Mr. Elwell."

"Well, that's flattering, Doctor. Sit down. The thing we'd like to do is have a talk with one of the patients here. We'd like to find out if that's possible. It's Ricco."

"Riccardo Guerentez," I said. It brought a look from all of them, but the Doctor. He looked blank. "The man whose room you chased me out of," I explained.

"Oh, yes. Well, he's dead, you know."

"We didn't," I said.

"I did everything I could," Phillips said, "but it was no use. There was just the faintest of pulse and, well," he shrugged.

"Well," Elwell said, "that's that."

"Yes," Phillips said. "I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help." He stood up.

"Wait," I said. "How did he die?"

"I can't say positively, but I rather think it was an overdose of morphine."

"An accident?" I asked.

"I couldn't say."

I didn't have any more questions and Phillips left. It was Hope who broke the silence that followed.

"Bayler," he said. "He took care of Ricco before he ran. That ought to prove it."

"I don't see how," I said. "He left enough here to hang himself. Why take time to put one talkative guy out of the way?"

There was a knock at the door and Hope went to it, opened it a crack and then went out, closing the door.

Elwell said: "I'm afraid Ricco's death doesn't signify."

"He was murdered," I said. "A habit in Coastview lately."

"I believe it's over now," Elwell insisted.

Hope came back and walked over to Best. There was a whispered conference. Then Hope sat down and Best cleared his throat.

"Now, Cash," he said, "maybe you'd like to explain how come your fingerprints were in the apartment where Stella Regan was killed."

CHAPTER XXV

"I'VE BEEN IN RICCO'S APARTMENT," I SAID.

"When Stella was killed?" Hope asked.

"I didn't say that. I've been there and I probably left prints."

Hope took a quick look at Elwell. The big man was studying me but I couldn't tell anything from his expression; or lack of one.

"The prints," Hope said, "were on the neck end of a broken bottle. The other end, the jagged one, had blood on it. There were your prints on other bottles and on the window of the back bedroom; the window we figure the murderer used as an exit." I didn't say anything. "And," Hope went on, "I've noticed you've been favoring your left arm. Maybe a knife wound . . ." He let it hang there.

"Was it a bottle that killed Stella?" I asked.

"You know it wasn't," Hope said. "She was beaten with a gun butt."

Sgt. Peters, who'd gone out with the squad to Moss's place, came into the room then. "The Surf Club is closed up tight," Peters reported. "We busted in, but

there wasn't anybody around. Looked like he cleared out in a hurry too. Up to his house there was a couple of people that worked for him. He ain't been there since he left this morning. And his wife got a phone call and took off about an hour before we showed up."

"Get out a wanted call on him," Elwell said, "describe his cars and his wife and alert all the radio patrols. I imagine the FBI will take it from there."

They turned up as soon as Peters left, two young men, conservatively dressed, nicely mannered and nosey as hell. They didn't like the story they got, but they didn't say much about the sorry state of Best's police department.

The Narcotics men were the same, two quietly dressed, polite, serious men, both a little older than the FBI boys. They took over, impounded a good supply of junk, checked and found that fifteen dope addicts were quartered in the hospital. Whatever plans they had they kept to themselves, dismissed us, and went on quietly nosing around.

By the time we got to the Police Station, the word was out that the Feds had moved into town and a lot of worried little people were crowding the place. They were all getting the same advice from Vogel at the desk. Wait for Best.

So it was an obstacle course for Best to get to his office. He didn't know what to tell anyone. Elwell gave him the word and it went down to the worried crowd. Close up anything that stunk until the Feds moved out. Most of the worried ones left. The reporters stayed and Best, coached by Elwell, gave them as fairy a tale about the morning's activities as ever I'd heard. Bayler was the villain, along with Ricco and the Moss brothers; the dope angle had been cleaned up and the gangster's hide-out discovered by the diligent work of the Coastview police, and the town was whitewashed six ways and with very wide brushes.

Then Hope, in his capacity as press representative, took over.

"Bayler and his hospital," he said without blushing, "have been under suspicion for some time. Chief Best and his department have finally, through expert, patient, arduous work, cleaned out a rat's nest that might have afflicted any city. Coastview has cleaned its own house and other communities could well take the example."

It made me a little sick to my stomach and most of the reporters had trouble to keep from vomiting, but it was the official story and there wasn't anybody left alive or available to contradict it. Maybe I could have, and maybe if I had I'd have been booked for Stella's murder. I kept my mouth closed.

Afterwards the four of us were together again in Best's office. Hope sent out for beer and sandwiches and we ate and drank and they hashed over the best way to clean up the loose ends.

"How many boys does Moss have?" Elwell asked.

"Six or eight, eight, I think, with that new one, Loop." Hope had the answer.

"And Ricco?"

"Three."

"Get their names and descriptions on the radio," Elwell said, "I want any loose ones picked up. Vag them if you can't find anything else. Brant and Moran will have to keep their places closed and their boys out of sight."

"Moss's boys are with him," I said. "I saw six at the hospital when he took Nick, and probably two more were out with the cars."

"Too big a mob to hole up," Elwell told me, "so he probably turned some of them out on their own."

The intercom broke into sound. "Mr. Brant is here, Chief." It was the Mick's voice. Best looked at Elwell, who nodded, and then the Chief said,

"Send him in."

Brant was a small man, built wide and close to the ground. His suit was three hundred dollars worth of tan gabardine and the diamond ring on the little finger of his right hand could have set CARE up for a year. His

eyes were slightly oriental and his hair was brown and his mouth was thin and not much used to smiling.

He stood in the doorway and looked around the room giving me a little extra attention. Hope stood up and Brant walked over and sat down in the vacated chair. He was careful to hike up his pant legs.

"All right, Tom," he said. His voice was low and without any expression.

Elwell finished his beer, set the can on the desk and then carefully wiped his lips with his handkerchief.

"I wanted to have a little talk with you, Pete."

"Sure. What's the snoop doing here?"

"I'll vouch for Cash," Elwell said. "Now, Pete, I made some arrangements with some people here in Coast-view; and in return for certain things I got some assurances. I don't have to go into that, you know about it. And later I made certain arrangements with you. I'm sure you remember."

"Yeah."

"Several things have happened. Moss brought his brother into this town, a man wanted by the FBI. Ricco and Bayler were running dope into the place."

"So what? It wasn't my doing."

"You knew about it?"

"I keep my nose clean."

"You also gave me certain assurances," Elwell said.

"I run my joint and my slots and I don't run no dope and I haven't got no brothers or buddies holed up here. I keep my nose clean. And what I give you was my promise I'd back you against anybody who didn't keep the peace. I didn't say I'd do no snooping, you was supposed to bring me the problem. Ain't that the way we agreed?" Elwell started to say something. Brant held up his hand. "And just for the record, so it's straight, I ain't pleased to be called down here and given no fast shuffle in front of the punks you got hired. And also, I don't care none for the way things been handled. You'd have come to me with it, I'd have taken care of it, moved it out

without Feds and all the noise. Now you say whatever you got to say."

"It was handled the way it was because I didn't know anything about it until too late. But you did."

"I heard rumors. I don't run with Ricco or Moss and I don't know what they're up to. Rumors, I heard."

"Walker Emmet was your boy," I said.

Brant looked at me. "I heard about you," he said, "you got a big mouth and maybe some big plans. So far you ain't interested me none, but don't get in my way." He turned back to Elwell. "I don't want no fight with you, Tom. I've done what I said I would. I'll keep on doing it."

"All right, Pete," Elwell said. "I reminded you of our arrangement because I want you to take over what Ricco and Moss had."

Brant smiled a thin smile. "I intended to anyway."

"There's Moran," Elwell said.

"Moran was there before." Brant stood up, and walked out.

"All right," I said. "Very impressive. Anyway maybe it will work, maybe Brant will get it and take Moran with him."

Elwell was writing while I talked. He handed me the slip, a check for ten thousand.

"I think that winds up our business, Cash."

"You want me to tell Sue about it."

"It won't be necessary."

I folded the check and put it in my pocket. I got up.

"And this ends the rest of it too?" I asked. He nodded. I walked to the door. There I turned. "For awhile," I said, "I thought you'd forgotten that slap in the face Big Mike hung on you." He didn't say anything. "Suppose," I went on, "that Moran gets Brant?" He looked up and studied me. "Or what if Brant comes out of it? How are you going to get rid of him?" He was silent. I opened the door and then turned back. "Either way," I said,

"you paid me off too soon. I'm going to get the guy behind Bayler."

I went out.

CHAPTER XXVI

I KNEW I was walking out on a lot more than Elwell's protection and favor. Behind me was a possible murder charge and Best's and Hope's desire to press it. And both of them close to Elwell again. I could pretty well figure the big man's reason for dropping me. He'd come out of it clean. He'd used me to do what would have had to been done sooner or later. And with Brant and Moran at war he stood a good chance of getting his town back. If he was the one behind Bayler it figured the same way, Bayler was the goat, Moss was on the run, Ricco was dead and Brant and Moran would soon be knifing each other. And it would end up with Elwell back or still in charge, clean and rid of a lot of potential trouble. The dope and abortion racket had got out of hand, Bayler had been too greedy, knew too much and had to be taken out. Murder piled on murder hadn't been the answer, the place had to be cleaned out and I'd been around, ineffectual without his help and protection and not too seemingly dangerous with it. The boys, Bayler and Ricco (I didn't think Moss was in the know), had probably been conned by Elwell's explanation; I'd be given a goat, Walker Emmit, and that would satisfy me and close the embarrassing Grange case once and for all.

And when I hadn't been satisfied Elwell had made me his proposition; ten grand and his help to find the real boss. And he'd probably been able to keep Bayler and Ricco quiet by telling them that I was on the payroll

and would do and find just what he wanted done and found.

And it was Stella who'd upset things with her phone call, and it was Bayler, acting on his own who'd rigged the frame around me that still could be made to fit; Bayler who'd said he ought to check with Elwell and hadn't. He must have told Elwell later, though, because the Superchief hadn't been surprised when Hope sprung it on me about the prints. It must have been Elwell who had them take my prints from the Chief's office for comparison with the ones on the bottle. Nobody else would have been suspicious of me, nobody but Elwell who knew from Bayler that I'd been in the apartment.

That was nice thinking if Elwell was the one behind Bayler. But suppose he really wasn't. Even though I couldn't think of anyone else who could have stayed undercover so successfully. But suppose he wasn't the one? Suppose he really believed that it ended with Bayler. Suppose he hadn't known about the dope and abortions and Nick Moss. He'd be sickened by the mess, a mess he hadn't figured when he'd cut up Coastview and given it to the big four. Now, with the whole dirty stink uncovered, he'd want to be rid of them all; set Brant against Moran and hope they'd take each other out and then he'd be free of it. And maybe he even planned to keep the goons and gambling out. Maybe. Maybe he had enough now, enough stink and trouble and doubt from his daughter; and enough money. If that was true, he'd paid me off for what he really believed was a finished job and the final cleaning up was his own business, to do in his own way.

Try it both ways, I decided. Try it with Elwell as the big boss.

I'd been over it that way and it worked out fine. I could believe that.

Now try it the other way; somebody else as the big boss. Who? Well, be scientific.

Frank Best? Not impossible, but not probable. He

didn't have the brain for it. Did he fit the physical facts?

One. He was there when Elwell ordered the heat on and Walker Emmitt picked up. He could have tipped Emmitt, could have told him to run for the hospital and safety, could have set the trap and could have known that Emmitt's reaction to the double cross would be to shoot it out.

Two. He could have tipped Moss to come and take his brother, could have told his cops to lay off when Moss showed up.

Three. He could have known from Bayler about the frame and he could have had my prints taken from his desk for comparison.

Four. He couldn't have tipped Bayler. I was in his office when I told him I was going to talk to Bayler and he hadn't been out of my sight after my announcement.

Exit Frank Best, unless he'd managed to have Hope warn Bayler and I didn't want to believe that. It put too many in the know about who the big boss really was. And Hope was alive.

How about Marvin Hope?

One. He fitted that.

Two. He fitted that.

Three. He fitted that.

Four. He fitted that.

Brains? He had enough. Motive: Dough. Guts? Plenty. Any snags? One. He was at the police station when I called from the hospital. Elwell wasn't at home or at his office. And Bayler had to have a place to run to and it seemed likely that the big boss would be there to meet him and make sure he would keep away until the stink dissipated. Wait a minute, Mister Cash. Bayler didn't know there was any stink. Bayler just had to be out until I got tired of waiting for him. Then he could come back, things could be cleaned up some or put out of sight enough and all he had to say was that Walker Emmitt had ordered him to take Squint in and that he'd obeyed a police order. I might not have thought much of the

story, but so what? So Bayler had to be told that the whole thing was cracked wide open after it happened. He had to be told to stay hidden. And Elwell had made a phone call from the pay booth at the hospital. Had Hope? He could have, but I was sure Elwell had.

The hell with it, I thought, it doesn't signify. That's what Elwell had said of Ricco's death. The hell with it. Someplace the guy behind Bayler had showed his hand. Someplace there was something that only he had done or been able to do. It had to be there; it had to, but I couldn't see it.

I was at my car by then and I noticed the ticket on the windshield for overtime parking.

"Damn it," I said, aloud, "when you're out, you're really out."

"I can get it fixed for you, Steve."

The voice was at my side and it belonged to Pete, the proprietor of the crummy bar on Ocean Avenue. Pete, the little punk who wanted to be big. The dreamer with a tight mouth that was loose. His mean little eyes shifted over me.

"I been looking for you, Steve."

"You found me," I said.

"I want you to come over to the place."

"Offer me an inducement," I said.

"What?"

"What is the incentive?"

"You're kidding."

"I'm kidding," I agreed.

"A guy there wants to see you."

He was keeping his voice low and he kept his eyes darting around searching for eavesdroppers. There weren't any.

"What guy?" I asked.

"What's with the give and take, Steve? This is a guy you want to see. Do I ever steer you wrong?"

"Your record in that endeavor," I said, "is a matter of lack of opportunity, rather than a scarcity of attempt."

"Always kidding," he said.

"Let's go," I told him.

We rode in my car. He talked a lot without saying much, mostly about his chances of taking Ricco's interests over now that the gangster was dead. According to his story he had an angle.

I parked in front of his bar and started to get out.

"Wait, Steve, I want to be sure you remember it was me who brung you here. I'm the guy what set it up for you. I'm the one who brung you into it. Remember that, huh?"

"I'll have it tattooed on my chest."

"Just remember it when the payoff comes, huh?"

"You have my word," I said and got out.

He had to unlock the place. Inside the bar looked naked without the slots and punchboards. He locked the door behind us and led me over to the closed door of the backroom. There, he knocked.

A muffled voice, somehow fuzzy, from behind the door said:

"Yeah."

"Me, Pal," Pete answered, "I got him. Open up."

The pug who unlocked the door was new to me but he was typical. A strong arm, probably a trigger boy, thick-headed and thick-tongued because he was somewhat drunk.

He peered at me and then made his way carefully back to the table and the bottle of whiskey. He sat down, I took another chair, Pete locked the door and then joined us. The goon tilted the bottle and gulped and then passed it to me. I handed it to Pete and, because it was his whiskey and he knew it, he shoved it back to the goon. A short circle and a pleasing one to the goon. He drank again.

"Pete told me that you'd be the guy to put out some dough for some information." The goon fastened his eyes on my face.

"I might," I said.

"When the Feds come in I blow," he said. "That's the way I work. Don't give a damn what else happens, I blow. See?"

"A good policy," I said.

"Yeah. Well, now the Feds are in and now I'm going to blow. Buster Loop don't hold still for no Fed rap."

"Buster Loop?"

"That's me. And now I blow. See?"

"I see."

"Takes dough."

"How much dough?"

"Two grand. Cheap too."

"What do I get for two grand?" I asked.

"Just some information that'll get you your two grand back, plus more, that's all."

"Why don't you use it yourself?"

"I don't deal with no Feds. I blow, see?"

"Sell it to Pete," I said.

"He ain't got no two grand. He's got maybe five hundred skins. You think I do credit with that son of a bitch?"

"You do credit on the booze," Pete said.

Buster tilted the bottle and drank.

"It's lousy booze," he said.

"What's the information?" I asked.

"You buying?"

"Not blind. If it's something I want I'll buy."

Buster thought it over, drank and then said, "You don't buy you clam up, see?"

"If you didn't know that you wouldn't have sent for me."

"Pete sold you."

"Then he sold you that part of it, too," I said. "What's the information?"

"I know where Moss and his brother are holed up. You want to buy that?"

CHAPTER XXVII

I THOUGHT ABOUT IT. I didn't believe Moss knew the big boss, but I couldn't be sure. If he did. . . . Ah, the hell with it, I thought, it was information that could stir things up and that was enough. Grange had had a lot for very little money so far, he could afford this. And I was tired of beating my brains out, tired of trying to figure this fact and that fact and this hunch against both of them. My pappy used to say that the best way to get to the bottom of things was to turn them upside down.

"I'll buy that," I said. "How many others have bought?"

"You're the only one," Buster said. "You think I'm some kind of crook?"

"Pete?"

"If he sold he didn't get nothing. He come here flat broke."

"All right," I said. "I'll give you a note to a guy, he'll give you the dough. I want Pete to drive you to the place and to stay with you until you blow L.A. See?"

He looked hurt. "You don't trust me?"

"Like a brother, but I'm cautious. If I find out you sold this same thing to someone else, I'm going to see that Moss knows who stooled. See?"

"I gotta trust you for the dough."

"Yeah."

"So you trust me, see?"

"I do. Pete will just be along you shouldn't get lonely."

"O.K. Write the note."

I got a card from my wallet and scribbled on the back.

"Pop, give this guy two grand. Steve Cash." I wrote Pop Levy's address on the front under my name.

"You'll give him the card and he'll keep it and give you the dough." I handed him the card. "Now the information."

He read the card, turned it over and studied it and then put it in his pocket. "Get out, Pete," he said.

"For my part in it," Pete complained, "I get kicked out."

"You wouldn't want the information, Pete," I told him. "You're not going to blow. For your part I'll remember my promise and some dough will be due you after you see Buster off. All right?"

"You think I ain't going to collect for the booze, Buster, you think again."

"Blow," Buster said. Pete went out and closed the door. Buster drank, draining the bottle and then threw it across the room where it smashed against the wall. He laughed. "Lousy booze," he said.

"The information," I said.

He leaned forward. "They're at the Palace, Moran's place." His voice was almost a whisper. "Moss and Nick and seven of the boys."

"You're sure?"

"Hell, yes, I'm sure. I was with them when they got Nick from the hospital. I drove and that's where they went and the rest of the boys followed us there. First chance I got I powdered."

"They miss you?"

"Why you think I'm holed up here? But they ain't going to move. Moran and his boys are there and they'll be able to take care of any trouble."

"I don't get Moran's angle," I said. I didn't expect an answer, but Buster had one.

"He thinks uncovering Nick was Elwell's plan and he thinks the whole goddammed set up is Elwell's way of pushing the whole bunch out of Coastview. I ain't so

goddammed sure he's wrong, neither. The dame's there."

"What dame?"

"That dame of Moran's. They're going to have one hell of a time moving that Mick out too."

"O.K.," I said. "You blow."

"You think I won't? My ass will be in a sling when you break this. They know I run out and it'll have to come from me. Pete," he hollered, "come on in and bring some more of that lousy booze."

I met Pete right outside the door. "Get him up to L.A.," I said, "and see that he gets out of there when he gets the dough. I'll stand the booze."

I gave him a twenty.

He walked to the door with me and let me out. I drove to the nearest drug store and a phone booth and called Squint's house. He wasn't home, but he had been and had gone out again. His wife wasn't worried.

I got him at his office and told him to meet me at the Beacon, a bar and grill just outside of Coastview. Then I killed time driving slowly out there. I was early so I put five nickels through a pin ball machine. I got a lot of lights, but no score.

"A racket," I said.

"Well, most things is nowadays," the bartender told me.

When Squint arrived I took him to a back booth, ordered a beer and a drink and then briefed him on everything that had happened. When I'd finished, he said:

"You done real good, boy."

"I done no good, boy," I said. "I'm still just about where I started. I evened things up a little for Alp and Stella, but the guy who gave the orders is laughing at me. I don't like it, Squint."

"It couldn't have been Bayler?"

"That's it, Squint," I said. "It could have been. Just like maybe Elwell believes if it isn't him and just like

maybe I ought to believe. But I can't. And I can't tell you why. It's a hunch, but it's a strong one."

"Well, you've been paid off by Elwell and you could sell Grange on Bayler and that would wind it up, wouldn't it?"

"Sure. Would you be satisfied?"

"I'll stay with your hunch, Steve," he said. "You're closer to it than I've been. Then it's got to be Elwell?"

"He's the best bet," I said.

"Yeah. Especially when you heard Bayler say he should check with him in the apartment there."

"I'm trying to remember just what he did say, Squint. Was it . . . I ought to check with Elwell? With? No, it wasn't quite that. Ah, hell, it doesn't matter. Wait, I remember. He said, I should check and find out what Elwell . . . and then he stopped. Does that signify?"

"Does it what?"

"Nothing."

"What are you going to do with the information?"

"That's a lulu, isn't it?"

"A sweetheart," Squint said.

"I'm going to see Moran," I said.

"That's nice. At the Palace?"

"I mean it, Squint," I said.

He drained his glass and put it on the table carefully.

"Steve, I'll go along with your hunch," he said, "but this isn't the way to play it. Give this information to the FBI and let them handle it. Then get out of Coastview, just like you were satisfied and through and then you can dig around quietly without digging your own grave. I'm serious."

"So am I," I said.

"You're on a white horse. You've done more than Grange had any right to expect. There's only a nagging doubt about whether Bayler was the boss. Even if it is Elwell, you can't touch him. Listen to me, Steve. What's in it for you? Why?"

"Because if it is Elwell, I've been used to do his dirty

work. I don't like that. If it isn't Elwell, then I haven't done my job and I've been paid for it. I'm no crusader, I've got nothing but a reputation. I'm a stinking private investigator and all I've got to sell is the fact that I can do a job. So I've got to do the job. I'd feel the same way if it was a simple case of collecting a bill."

"But you can still do the job without walking into the Palace and Moss's guns."

"No," I said, "I can't, because if I give this information to the FBI, they'll move in and take the Mosses and Moran and put them away and that leaves Brant and Elwell sitting just where they want to be. And if it isn't Elwell, it'll still leave the boss clean and undercover, and with plenty of time to bury everything."

"What can you do?"

"I can keep things stirred up so there isn't time to cover up the way it ought to be done. There's something, a slip, something that nags me. It can be hidden if things settle down. Now if that makes me a knight on a white horse make the most of it. I've got ten grand in my pocket and money due from Grange and I haven't earned it. You just don't ask a guy to quit when he's almost got what he's after, whether it's money or fame or a woman, or maybe just the satisfaction of doing a job he was hired to do. And, maybe," I added, "a job that the employer thought he goddammed well couldn't do."

"All right, Steve, all right," Squint said. "Don't get violent."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but this thing's got me."

"What do you want to do?"

"I'm going to the Palace," I said. "From there on it's ad lib; I don't have any more idea of what I'm going to do once I'm in there than you have; I'm like the jumping bean, the worm makes him jump."

"Which worm is making you jump?" Squint asked.

"Maybe we'll find out."

"O.K. When do I go to the FBI?"

"Give me two hours," I said. "Stay here for a phone call until then."

"All right. What kind of flowers?"

"What the hell," I told him. "Orchids, I can afford them."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THERE ARE TWO ROUTES from the Beacon to the Palace. One, direct right through town, past the police station and the other around the business district leading to the back parking lot of Moran's big Spanish building. I took the back route; I didn't want to advertise the fact that I was still in Coastview and I didn't want to go past the police station. Best and Hope might have talked Elwell into lowering the murder charge against me. And the back route led me past a small building that housed the offices of Doctor Phillips. I stopped the car there and went in. It took five minutes of the Doctor's time for me to get the information that a two grain charge of morphine injected into a vein would kill a man in about fifteen minutes. And Ricco had died in just about that time.

Moran's was silent.

I drove into the back lot and parked the car close to the big building. There weren't any other cars around. I walked along the shrub lined path to the front of the building. A big maroon sedan and two smaller cars were parked there.

I walked up to the front door and banged the knocker.

I'd been watched. Danny Shay opened the door. The dead pan showed nothing and the icy green eyes ran

over me and then he gave me a nodding jerk with his head. I followed him in and waited until he bolted the door again. Without a word he led me down to Moran's office, opened the door and stood aside while I went in. He followed me.

Moran was at his desk.

And perched on the edge of it was Clara Best. At thirty-five she was still whistlebait, a lushly endowed woman who thrived on booze and sex and looked like she ought to be modeling Bikinis. Her hair was bottle blond. There wasn't much of Sue about her, she was all bedroom and her eyes licked you. I'd seen her before and she'd seen me and still the look she gave me was one of speculation. Like wide shoulders ought to mean something and the only way to find out was to find out.

And this time she looked a little different; there was no drink in her hand.

Danny pushed a chair up to the desk and I sat down. Moran gave me his crooked smile and waited. It was my visit. I waited too.

Clara broke the silence. "What is it?" she asked, "charades?"

"All right, Steve," Moran said, "spill it."

"Do I have to talk in front of her?"

"You don't have to. Danny will let you out."

"All right. Elwell paid me off. And Best has rigged a murder charge against me."

"Stella?" I nodded. "What's it to me?"

"Nothing," I said. "But maybe you'll understand why I came here. So far I haven't been put on the pick up. I don't think Bayler was the guy behind Grange's murder and I want the guy who was."

"So?"

"So it won't suit my plans for Brant to take over Ricco and Moss's interests and have everything quiet down. I don't think that suits you either."

"Brant isn't taking over anything of Moss's. I am."

"Elwell had Brant in Best's office while I was there and handed over the keys to the city to him."

"The son of a bitch," Shay said.

"You came here to tell me that?" Moran asked.

"More than that, like I said, I don't want things quiet now, that wouldn't give me a chance to uncover the real murderer. And if Brant takes over he'll be able to move you out without too much fuss."

"You think so?"

"The way things are now he won't even have to do the moving."

"What does that mean?"

"It means," I said, "that Moss is here and sooner or later the Feds will know it. And they'll do Brant's work for him. And then he'll have everything."

Moran's smile was gone now.

"I found out Moss and his brother are here," I went on, "and if I did how long do you think it'll take the FBI to get it?"

"Yeah."

"That's what I came to tell you. You'd better cut loose from the Mosses. With them around your neck, you're a sitting duck for the Feds. Without them you can probably handle Brant."

"I can handle him."

"And when I tag Elwell you'll have it all alone."

Clara slid off the desk to her feet and started for the door.

Shay stepped in front of her and she stopped and turned to Moran.

"Tell this punk to get out of my way, Mike."

"Where you going?" he asked.

"I'm going to tell Dad. What do you think I am?"

"I know what you are, Clara. Maybe it's Brant you're going to tell."

"Brant doesn't mean anything to me, but I'm not going to stand still while you plot against my father. If he

hadn't set you up, you'd still be running around with your ass hanging out of your pants."

"I wouldn't give a goddam what you told your father," Moran said, "but you're not going carrying tales to Brant. Sit down and shut up or I'll have Danny sit you down."

It didn't take Clara long to make up her mind. Then she walked over to the couch and slouched into it and I couldn't help but remember the last time I'd been in this room with Stella sullen and pouting on the same couch. Moran watched her until she was seated and then turned to me. The brogue and the genial smile were gone.

"Get this, Steve," he told me, "I don't trust you any further than that." He held his thumb and forefinger about a quarter of an inch apart. "Maybe not that much. I don't think you've the chance of a snowball in hell of getting anything on Elwell, but I'm willing to believe that that's what's bothering you and has been right along, even when you were working for him. And it so happens that I've got a score to settle with him myself. He's tried to push me out for the last time. Brant too. So this time your advice happens to suit me."

He lit a cigarette and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

"Danny," he said, "go get Tony Moss."

"He'll be glad to see me," I said. "I shot his brother."

"You did?" It was Moran.

I nodded.

"He don't know it," Shay said, "Nick has been blacked out ever since Tony snatched him from the hospital."

"As long as he," I started, but I never finished that sentence. The door was violently swung open and banged against the wall and Tony Moss, his eyes crazy and the gun in his hand ready, burst into the room. He stopped just inside and looked around and his look stopped at me.

"You dirty son of a bitch," he said, and the gun barked twice and I fell, unhit, sideways onto the floor. I heard

the third shot and then, just as if time stopped and stood still, everything slowed down and it seemed that everybody was in slow motion and I heard Moran say, "Danny," and I looked up and watched Danny draw from the shoulder holster and saw the gun in his hand and the expression on his face, one of pleasure, as he pulled the trigger and shot Moss in the belly and noticed Moss drop the gun and fall forward with his hands holding his stomach. Then I got up. And it wasn't until then that I saw Clara.

She was still slouched on the couch, but this time her mouth was open and a red stain was marking the place where her left breast pushed against the material of her dress. Her eyes were open and I knew she was dead.

Danny carefully holstered his gun and walked, stepping over Moss, out through the door into the hallway.

I looked at Moran. He was looking at Clara, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"Moss got her," he said, but he wasn't talking to me. "The crazy dumb bastard."

I felt for my gun and put my hand around it. I didn't know what reaction the big Irishman would have. But when he turned to me he was smiling the crooked smile.

"That's the way it goes," he said.

We waited, standing until Danny came back.

"Nick came to just before he kicked off," Danny explained, "and told Tony it was Cash who shot him. Tony had seen Cash come in and he come down here gunning for him."

"What'd you tell his boys?"

"We got them under control. What you want to do?"

"I'm going to call Best," Moran said. "Story is that Moss came here and tried to make me hide him out. We had to shoot him. Take his boys out of town, they'll be glad to get out of it." Danny nodded and went out again. Moran turned to me.

"Worked out nice, didn't it?" he asked.

CHAPTER XXIX

IT WAS MORAN'S SUGGESTION that I blow and forget I was there which was what I wanted.

"They're not going to believe this set up," he said, "but what the hell can they do about it?"

"Nothing, I guess. You think Moss's boys will take this?"

"Why not? Moss paid them and now he ain't able to they'll take my dough and fade. You better get going."

I took the direct route back to the Beacon, figuring that Moran's news would have Best and Hope too busy to bother about me. Squint was still at the same booth where I'd left him, but it wasn't the same drink. I told him what had happened.

"Now what?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "When Elwell finds out about Moss it'll be his move. He's either got to make peace with Big Mike or fight him."

"He'll fight him," Squint said. "Mike will want too much."

"Yeah. I wish I could find Bayler."

"Alive?"

"Sure."

"Not much chance."

"I don't suppose so. He's probably been put away. He's got to turn up though."

"Just where in hell could Elwell keep a dead man? Not at home."

"Brant's," I suggested.

"Could be. How would you find out?"

"I wouldn't."

"Well," Squint drained his glass and put it on the table. "I'm going home and have dinner with my wife for a change."

"Pot roast?" I asked.

"She didn't say. You got any plans for later?"

I shook my head. "I'll call you if anything comes up."

Squint stood up. "You've been damned lucky so far, Steve. Don't push it too far, especially since Elwell isn't behind you."

"I'm not going to push it," I said. "I think it'll push itself."

When Squint left I ordered a beer and drank it and smoked a cigarette. Outside the dusk grew into darkness. Somewhere in that darkness Bayler was hidden, dead or alive. Bayler who could be the key to my problem. If he showed up murdered I might be able to convince Elwell that Bayler wasn't the end. And even if he didn't want convincing, Sue would. So I had to find Bayler.

There are a lot of ways to find a man. It's a business and it was my business and I decided to go at it just as though I had all the time in the world and somebody was paying fifty a day for the job. I got Bayler's home address from the phone book and drove over there. 810 Miramar Drive, not far from the hospital.

It was a two story, stucco place, a duplex and the Doctor's was the downstairs part. The woman who opened the door to my ring was fortyish, small, neat looking and just slightly loaded, she smelled like the third drink, the third strong drink, and she smiled pleasantly at me and invited me in. And it was almost a total failure. She hadn't heard from the doctor, she sometimes didn't and she didn't call the hospital because she'd got over that a long time ago. Like Squint's wife, she wasn't worried. And nobody had bothered to call on her and tell her about what had happened at the hospital that afternoon, so I didn't either. The only thing I did get was that the doctor drove a Ford, a Ford coupe, black, and as she put it, very plain.

She didn't bother to ask me what I wanted or why I was interested in the doctor. I asked her if she knew Ricco and that drew a blank and then she asked me if I'd care for a drink; she made, she said, a very fine Manhattan, she used half sweet and half dry Vermouths and it was really very good. I thanked her, declined and left.

The next stop was the hospital and I could have eliminated it. They didn't expect the doctor, hadn't heard from him and I got the feeling that as far as they were concerned he could stay lost. There were no cops or Feds there.

Aimlessly, I drove past Elwell's. The big place was bright with lights, but I didn't have any business there yet. And Best's house was dark. I drove without purpose, trying to think, trying to figure just where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do when I got there. And all the time the nagging kept on. The feeling that there was something I knew and couldn't remember and needed to. It was on Crest, a sparsely lit, medium class street that I saw a black Ford coupe parked. I pulled up behind it and cut my lights.

It was registered to Quinten Hoyt.

And then, walking back to my car I remembered Hope's statement in the hospital, the statement: "This isn't the way, Frank, wait for the tests, wait for that."

And the tests had to mean the fingerprint tests from Ricco's apartment and I wanted to know how Hope knew enough to compare my prints with them. I wanted to know that.

The phone book in a corner drug store gave me Hope's new address. 424 Crest. I went out and climbed into my car and U turned and drove back to the dark street where I'd seen the Ford, the wrong black Ford.

Hope's was a small white frame house set back on the lot and boasting two tall eucalyptus trees in the front yard. As usual, they hadn't done the lawn any good and it was patched with brown bare spots under the trees. The house was dark.

I drove past and to the next street and down it to the alley, turned and navigated slowly along until I came to the garage behind the white frame house. It had old fashioned doors hinged to swing out and it was locked from the outside with a padlock. I drove on past and down to the cross street and along it to the corner and parked and walked back to Hope's.

The front door was locked, the windows were down and locked and the back screen door was hooked from the inside. I went back to the car and got a flashlight and a screw driver. With it, I poked a hole in the screen large enough to get my hand through to unhook the door.

It led me into a small service porch. I flipped on the flash. There was a sanitary tub, water heater and a box of trash. And there was a door, with a glass window and this door was locked and the key was on the inside.

I'd have left then except for the nagging and the feeling that I had to know about Hope and how he'd connected me with Ricco's apartment. I couldn't go to the police station and talk to him. I could have gone to the car and waited for him to come home, but I wanted to see how he lived, I wanted to poke around without his knowledge, I wanted, if I could find it, something to hold against him, the way he and Best and Elwell were holding the murder charge against me. A guy as close to the brass as Hope was, and in a cesspool like Coastview, was bound to pick up things, papers and little bits of evidence, anything at all, just as insurance. I wanted to cancel his insurance.

I guess a private detective is supposed to have a set of lock picks. I didn't have any and I couldn't have used them if I had. I didn't know how. I'd read about a trick with a cellophane card, but I couldn't remember just how that was supposed to work, either. So I broke the glass and it made a hell of a clatter and I stood and waited until I thought maybe it hadn't been heard and then I reached through and turned the key.

In the beam of the flashlight I took in the kitchen. It

was small, standard in its equipment and with sort of an unused air. The sink was clean and the drainboard bare, not even a dirty coffee cup.

A swinging door led into a small dining alcove and that too was clean and unused.

The front room was different. The light showed a coffee table filled with litter, newspapers, and ash trays almost overflowing with butts, a half full bottle of bourbon and a glass with an inch of light brown liquid in it. A suit coat hung over the back of a straight chair, a pair of brown shoes with a pair of socks tucked in them sat in front of the chair, a maroon tie lay on the chair seat. The couch held an open newspaper and the pillows at one end still showed the imprint of a head. The front door opened into this room and one wall was broken by another door. I went through this and into a hall, one end of which led into a bedroom.

The room was unused too, the bed made and the dust undisturbed on the dresser and bed table. A door along the hall opened into a bathroom, which, like the kitchen, was somewhat old-fashioned. It showed signs of use, towels jammed onto the towel rack and shaving equipment on the wash basin.

The other end of the hall led to another bedroom, this one with an unmade bed and a littered dresser and night stand.

I poked through the dresser drawers, pawed through shirts, socks, shorts and handkerchiefs, routine stuff and not what I wanted. I shut the last drawer and swung the light around the room. Across from me was a closet door and I went to it and opened it.

He was tied with his hands behind his back and his legs drawn up into a jackknife position and the gag was meant to do more than keep him quiet and it had. He was dead and he'd never had a chance with the adhesive tape over his nostrils and the wad in his mouth bound on with more of the stuff.

"Doctor Bayler, I presume," I said.

CHAPTER XXX

I HAULED HIM OUT, got him onto the bed and untied. The tape was hard to tear off, and it wasn't any use because he'd been dead for quite awhile.

And as I stood looking at him everything fell into place. There it was: Hope. And Hope all the way, behind the murder of Doctor Grange because Grange had talked to and realized Lee Hinds' condition and function and maybe it had been Hope in the cell with Walker Emmitt when the body was hung. And Hope who'd had Alp picked up by Ricco and worked over to find out how much he'd seen and knew, and Alp had known about Moss hiding out at the hospital. So it had been Hope who'd be able to know when Elwell was getting wind of the dope, Hope who, through Emmitt could have Squint picked up and held at the hospital and Hope who knew Squint had to be turned loose because Elwell was hot. Hope who could control Bayler and Ricco because of the dope profit and his position as Best's advisor and his nearness to Elwell. Hope who'd known from Bayler that I'd been in Ricco's apartment and could get my prints to be compared. Hope who warned Bayler and then came here where he'd told Bayler to come and had killed him because Bayler had to show up dead. And Hope who'd been the only one who could have known where to get the morphine and had the time to kill Ricco. Elwell hadn't been in the hospital when the injection had been shot into Ricco. That had been the slip. And that let Elwell out.

Standing there, I remembered, how Hope had drawn Walker Emmitt's fire so that the cops would have to blast

him and thus close his mouth. Hope who'd warned Emmet and then set up the double cross that he knew would silence the crooked sergeant. A small gamble, knowing Emmet would be mad and unable to shoot straight.

Marvin Hope, who couldn't stand the association with big easy dirty money and had to get into the act the only way Elwell had left open. And he'd been able to play on Ricco's greed and smallness in the gambling setup, and on Bayler's rotten mind. And this was the end of the trail.

I checked my gun.

I didn't have a long wait. He had only waited for darkness. I heard the car drive up in front and the sound of his footsteps as he came up onto the porch and the fumbling scrape of the key in the lock. I was standing in the dark front room, my gun ready in my hand when he switched on the light.

"Get your hands up," I told him.

He didn't look worried. I suppose by that time he figured he couldn't lose; everything had run right for him and he probably thought he'd have an out this time.

He moved slowly, deliberately, away from the front door and the light switch and into the center of the room.

"You found Doc?" he asked.

"Dead," I said, "like you planned."

"Yeah. What put you on me?"

"You promoted the deal on my fingerprints in Ricco's. You shouldn't have known."

"Bayler's fault," he said, "the whole thing. He should have taken you out and sunk you."

"Yeah. Is Elwell behind you?"

He looked at me thoughtfully. I could see him weigh the possibilities of taking that line and I could see him discard it.

"No," he said, "it was my operation."

"You killed Grange?"

He nodded. "The Doc talked to Hinds and found out

that there were too many patients getting dope out there. He talked to Bayler Sunday evening and Bayler managed to give him a line, but I knew it wouldn't hold up long, so when the Eller dame came in it was our chance to get Grange out of our hair. And before you ask, Alp talked to Hinds too and nosed around too much. Ricco worked him over to find out what he knew."

"And you framed Walker Emmitt."

"Sure. I didn't think it was much of a chance to take."

I gestured around the room. "You didn't get much out of it," I said.

"Plenty salted away. I was almost ready to pull out."

"Instead you go down and tell all this to Best and Elwell and a few witnesses and we wrap it all up."

"You think so?"

"I think so."

"You're way off base, Cash. We've got a pick up out on you for Stella's murder. You walk into the station with me and you're going to be grabbed and put away. You got any proof against me?"

"Elwell will believe it, Marv, because he wants the guy who dirtied up his arrangements. So I'll take you there. And Bayler's body in on your bed is all the proof we'll need. Let's go."

"Wait, Cash. How about a deal?"

"Like what?"

"A full confession, everything in black and white and my signature at the bottom and me with a three hour start. How about that? You don't have much without that."

"Bayler's body," I said. "I won't deal. We're going to Elwell's."

"Not with me," he said. "Gun or no gun, I'm not going. Not alive."

"Don't kid," I told him. "I don't have to kill you to take you. I shoot you in both knees and drag you out to my car. The string's run out on you, kid. You're all done."

Now it was getting through to him, now he was believ-

ing that it was all over, but he didn't want to, he couldn't. He had it salted away and all he needed was one more break and he'd have it made. I felt a little sorry for him. He had to go with me. So he changed his plan. Sometime, on the way or when we got there, he'd get his chance. I could see his mind working.

"This," I told him, "is the way we'll do it. You drive. I've got the gun and it'll be right next to you and anything you do I don't like will get you a slug in your gut. Anything. Get it? Now turn around and put the hands up high."

He turned and I frisked him. He was clean. He hadn't even brought a gun.

"Out," I said. "And remember the slug waiting."

I kept behind him with the gun pressing against his back, low, where it wouldn't kill him, but would drop him and we walked down to my car and I pushed him into the righthand side and along to the driver's seat. The key was in and he turned it and thumbed the starter button.

"You know the way," I said. "And don't be cute, I'd like you better bleeding."

He drove slowly, carefully, and I kept the gun against his kidney.

All he said was: "One of us is making a mistake."

I didn't answer him.

Elwell's house was still bright. I herded Hope up to the front door and waited until the dignified butler opened it and asked: "Yes?"

"We'll see Mr. Elwell," I said.

"I'll inquire."

"No," I said. "We'll see him, it's important." I turned Hope slightly so Harris could see the gun. His expression didn't change.

"This way," he said.

He led us to the door of the den, knocked softly and then opened it and walked in in front of us.

Elwell was at the desk and I marched Hope over in

front of it. Harris cleared his throat and said: "These gentlemen. . . ."

Elwell's eyes were listless and his face sagged and the once tight mouth was slack. Beside him was a water glass half full of amber liquid and the odor of whiskey was strong in the room.

But he was sober.

"It's all right, Harris," he said and the butler left the room. I heard the soft click of the door behind me. "I've had some bad news this evening, Cash," Elwell said, "I'd rather be alone."

It sounded dignified and there was a pleading behind it. I ignored it. I prodded Hope into a chair near the desk and took one across from him, the gun held handy, and then, very deliberately, I told Elwell about Hope, everything ending with the finding of Bayler and my bringing Hope to his house. While I talked Elwell finished the whiskey in the glass. His expression, one of indifference, didn't change. When I'd finished he shrugged.

"Why here?" he asked.

"There's a murder rap against me at the station," I said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Call Best and have him pick up Hope here. At least we can tag him for Bayler's murder."

"All right," he agreed. "I want it over, I want peace."

"You won't get it," I said, "not with Brant and Moran battling."

"Moran's in jail," Elwell said. "Didn't Hope tell you?" I shook my head. "Frank did it," he went on and for the first time there was interest in his voice. "We underestimated Frank, didn't we. Seeing Clara . . ." he paused and then forced himself to go on, "seeing Clara put some spine in his back and he arrested Moran."

"Shay shot Moss," I said, "and it was self defense. I know because I was there and I was the one Moss was shooting at."

"It doesn't matter, we're holding Moran and by the time he gets out it'll be too late. By the time he gets out he'll be out." There was a faint smile. Faint and mirthless. "I'll call Frank," he said.

Hope let him reach for and lift the phone before he said: "Wait."

Elwell looked at him questioningly. "When the news of my arrest breaks," Hope said, "the L. A. papers are going to get some photostats." He smiled. This was the out, the ace, the insurance. "I think you know what they are, Elwell," he went on.

Elwell put the phone back on its cradle. He looked at Hope for a long minute and he knew all right. And I should have known. You can't be an Elwell and keep everything hidden; some place there has to be record and proof.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I'll put Bayler in his car and leave him at Five Arches, suicide. Then I'll get out. That ought to wind it up."

And the crazy part of it was that Elwell was considering it. I waved my gun at the two of them.

"You're forgetting me," I said.

They ignored the gun and they ignored me. Elwell opened the desk drawer and got a bottle and poured the water glass half full and carefully corked the bottle and put it back and all the time his manner was that of a man thinking over a business deal.

"What about the photostats?" he asked.

"They're safe as long as I am," Hope said. "We'll keep it that way."

"All right, but you'll get out of Coastview."

"I want to," Hope told him.

"This isn't going to work," I said, "because I'm going to spill the whole deal."

Elwell shook his head. "You're wanted on a murder charge, Cash. Get out and keep quiet and we'll drop it. Mess into this and you'll get it hung on you."

"You can't make a deal with a guy who's caused five

murders," I said. I was trying to be reasonable. "That makes you a murderer."

"Keep out of this, Cash."

"I'm goddammed if I will," I said, "I've worked too hard to catch this rabbit. Get up, Hope." He looked at Elwell and then at the gun and then stood up. "Over to the door," I said, "I'm putting you on ice for awhile."

"You won't get out of town," Elwell said.

"I'll take that chance."

The phone shrilled and Elwell picked it up, listened and his face turned chalky white. He mumbled, "All right." But his hand was steady when he put the phone down.

"Shay and Moran's mob broke Big Mike out of the jail," he said.

Outside we heard the wail of a siren.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE WAIL GREW LOUDER and finally died with a snarl in front of the house and then we heard the pounding on the door and finally Best, followed by a lot of cops in uniform, burst into the den. I'd put my gun into my pocket, but in the confusion it wouldn't have been noticed.

"Did you get the word, Tom?" Best asked breathlessly.

"They just phoned."

"I've got six boys with me, Tom, more on the way. He won't get within a mile of the place."

"Why should he?" I asked.

Nobody answered. The cops milled around the room and Best gave excited orders. "Cool," he said, "you take Joe and stay outside. When the patrol cars start coming

surround the house. Shoot to kill, Mike is crazy mad. Ed, you and Benny take the kitchen, keep the lights off and stay alert. Tom, you'd be better off upstairs. Where's Sue?"

"At the Club," Elwell answered quickly; the new spine in Best seemed to command it.

"Phone her to stay. He won't go there." Best surveyed the remaining cops, both of them. "Charlie, stay here with us; Pete, go into the living room across there. No lights and keep your eye peeled."

Elwell said, "She'll stay, there's a dinner dance."

Then Best noticed me. "What the hell . . . ?"

I opened my mouth, but Elwell beat me. "We're dropping that charge against Cash, Frank."

I shut my mouth. It just didn't seem the right time to put in my pitch about Hope.

So Hope played his top card. "I'd better go back to the station, Frank," he said, "there'll be reports . . ."

"They'll relay them here," Best stopped him, "we need every hand we can get right here."

Outside the wail of sirens sounded. "The patrol cars," Best said. "Cool will take care of them. We'll keep that goddammed Irishman out of this neighborhood."

"Why?" I managed.

Best stopped and the only sound was the whine of approaching sirens.

"Why?" he repeated. "You think Moran doesn't know what we planned for him while he was in jail? He knows all right. You know they held the whole station for fifteen minutes? You seen what he did to my office? You hear what he said about Tom? And Shay's drunk."

"He didn't get you," I said.

"I was home, that's why. And they called me as soon as Moran and his mob left. And I knew damned well he'd head out here after Tom. Listen. Some more cars, I had every damned patrol car ordered out here. You better go upstairs, Tom."

"I'm staying right here, Frank."

"Well, all right. He won't even get close, I guess. Marv, you got a gun?"

"No," Hope said. He smiled at me as Best handed him one. I kept my hand in my pocket on mine.

Best hustled out to inspect his defenses and the cop followed him. Hope casually inspected the gun. I said, "Don't get any ideas about it being all-settled." Hope just smiled.

Best came back, the cop trailing him. "Only two more cars out. And . . ." the familiar wail was sounding . . . "That's one of them, at least. I guess now we just wait."

"He might powder," I said.

"I hope to God he does," Best said. "He's got all of Moran's mob with him."

We waited. A half hour ticked away. Elwell finished his whiskey, thoughtfully poured more, offered Best some, was refused and put the bottle back in the desk drawer. Best rambled around, in and out, giving orders, reveling in his new authority. Hope sat with a smirk on his face and I sat and watched him play with the gun. Occasionally it pointed at me. Cozy.

When the phone shrilled Best rushed over to the desk and practically grabbed it from Elwell's hand. A look of annoyance crossed Elwell's face and then was replaced with one of acceptance, perhaps even a little pride.

"Yeah, Best," he said. "Yeah. What? Goddammit. Now? Yeah, yeah." Best slammed the phone down. "Moran and his mob are at the Black Cat, regular war there. Blew the damned front in with a bomb."

"We'd better get the State Police," Elwell said.

"Hell no, Tom," Best protested, "we can handle it. I'm taking some of the boys and going down there."

"Take them all, Frank," Elwell said. "Brant will keep Moran busy there."

"All right. I'll keep a man at the phone in Cass's drug store on the corner by Brant's. Call there. I'll get Mike. Don't worry about that. Hope, you stay here and I'll leave Cool and Ed outside." He ignored me and hustled out

and in a few minutes we heard the scream of the patrol cars leaving. And then silence.

And in silence I said: "This script was written for Gangbusters. Moran will come here now that his mob has drawn Best off to Brant's."

"I think so too," Elwell said. "I didn't want my home turned into an arsenal. Frank is becoming a little too aggressive, don't you think?" And again the faint smile. "He surprises me, Steve."

I looked at the old man carefully. Now there was interest in his face, he was alive again, faced with a fight. He was surprising me. Or maybe it was just the whiskey.

"Go out and get those two cops in here, Cash," he said. "Let's give Moran a chance to get in."

"O.K.," I said.

I got up and went to the door, opened it and stepped out into the hall closing the door behind me. I was almost to the front door before it hit me. I swung around just as the sound of the shot came from the den.

By the time I got there Elwell had put his gun on the desk blotter in front of him and Hope was on the floor where he had fallen forward out of the chair. His gun was on the floor beside him.

"He tried to escape," Elwell said very calmly.

"Sitting down?" I asked. "It won't work."

"Bayler's body is still at his place. It'll work. It's still my town, Cash."

"It's murder and there are still the photostats."

"His lawyer, Masket, probably has them. He can be bought."

"You planned it this way all the time," I said. "It would have been sooner if I'd left." He didn't deny it. "I didn't get out to the cops," I said.

"It doesn't matter." The voice came from the doorway. It was Danny Shay.

He was smiling, no dead pan, but the eyes were crazy and the gun in his hand looked big. He was drunk. And behind him, a bottle of Irish whiskey in his hand, was

Big Mike Moran. He swaggered past Danny into the room.

"Well, Tom," he said.

"I expected you, Mike. How's Brant?"

"Dead or going to be. Get the gun, Danny."

Danny walked carefully to the desk and picked up Elwell's gun. Mike looked down at Hope's body. "Got in your way, Tom?"

"He was behind Bayler," Elwell said.

Mike took a drink from the bottle, corked it and shoved it into his coat pocket. "And you were behind the idea of canning me while Brant moved me out. But it didn't work. I told you you weren't big enough, Tom. You pushed me too far."

"It's all yours now, Mike," Elwell said.

"All of it," Mike agreed. "The whole goddammed mess. But there's one little thing left . . . you. Go ahead, Danny."

Mike turned and walked toward the door and Danny brought the gun up aimed at Elwell and I could see his knuckles whiten and I pulled the trigger of my gun, shooting through the pocket once and then again and Danny slowly turned and now his face was surprise and then nothing and he dropped to the floor and Big Mike turned as I fired the second shot.

He looked at Danny, watching him turn and fall and then his face swung toward me and he said: "You son of a bitch," and pulled the bottle out of his pocket and threw it at me and I ducked and heard it crash the wall behind me and saw Mike coming toward me and I tried to get the gun from the ruined pocket and it caught and I pointed and fired and missed.

It didn't stop Mike. I ducked off the chair to the floor and rolled away and Mike swore and followed and I fired again and this one nicked him in the shoulder and stopped him for only a second, but I was able to get on my feet and around the desk behind Elwell. And that was the first time I saw what had happened to him because

I bumped his chair and his head fell forward and he ended face down on the desk. And there was a gurgle from him and that was all.

I said: "Christ."

But Mike was coming around the desk and I shot him in the leg and he screamed and fell and then crawled toward me dragging his leg and I backed slowly in front of him toward the door.

And at the door I turned and opened it and by that time I guess Mike had reached Danny and the gun, because it felt like someone pushed me hard out through the door and I don't think I even heard the shot and I fell and just missed Best charging down the hallway with the cops behind him.

And that's all I remember.

* * *

In the hospital Grange and Squint Lewis sat by my bed and I told Grange the whole story. Grange listened without interrupting until I'd finished.

"You didn't call me for the finish," Grange said.

"It happened too fast," I said.

"I know. Send me your bill. I . . . I'm not sure I like what I bought."

"A lot of blood," I said.

"Yes." He got up and walked out without saying anything else.

Later, when I sent him my bill along with the money left over from the five grand, he paid me by check. There was nothing else in the envelope.

When he'd gone, Squint said, "He's a grateful son of a bitch."

I said, "Yeah. What happened?"

"Moran is in the hospital, but he'll stand trial for Cool's murder when he's able. He and Danny took care of Cool a little too well."

"And Best?"

"He's running things. A very big shot now."

"A new spine," I said.

"Yeah."

A nurse came in and shooed Squint away and I slept and then the nurse was back with the news that a young lady wanted to see me. Sue Elwell.

"I don't want to see her," I said.

"You can. She can't stay long, but you can see her."

"I don't want to," I said.

"She's been crying."

"I don't give a damn if she's riding a one-wheeled bike; I don't want to see her, not now and not later."

"All right, all right." She glared at me and went out.

I closed my eyes and the vision of Sue came to me and I tried to push it aside and it wasn't until I remembered the crazy eyes of Danny Shay and the cold way he pointed the gun at Elwell, clenching his teeth to stop the drunken sway of his arm and the way his knuckles whitened.

And then I remembered the deliberate split second I waited so that Danny's shot would get away before I tagged him.

And then the vision of Sue went away.



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